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HAPPY JACK

MAX BRAND

Happy Jack

BLACK'S READERS SERVICE COMPANY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	NO MORE DESPERADOES	1
II	WHAT'S A DESPERADO?	7
III	CHARLIE LAKE COMES TO COLLECT	12
IV	A BIRD BECOMES A BIRD OF PREY	18
V	BUT THE BIRD STILL SINGS	24
VI	PROFESSOR LANG LECTURES	30
VII	MARSHAL KINNEY RIDES	36
VIII	"BLOW, BUGLE, BLOW!"	42
IX	CELL OF STEEL	47
X	KITTY MARVEL	53
XI	TRIALS OF A MARSHAL	59
XII	AND MORE TRIALS STILL	64
XIII	FREEDOM!	69
XIV	TO A NEW LIFE!	75
XV	ON A STOLEN HORSE	81
XVI	NEWS FROM A NUISANCE	87
XVII	WHAT MAKES FRIENDSHIP	92
XVIII	FOR OR AGAINST?	98
XIX	MARSHAL VERSUS MARE	104
XX	RIDING HOME WITH HANK	109
XXI	THERE WAS NO PLACE LIKE IT	115
XXII	MICE AND THE CAT	121

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXIII	TINY TOM IS SMALL INDEED	127
XXIV	WITH RIFLES IN THEIR HANDS	133
XXV	KINNEY AT THEIR HEELS	139
XXVI	A TREACHEROUS HOST	145
XXVII	AN UNWELCOME GUEST	151
XXVIII	KATE MARVEL'S PLEA	157
XXIX	TWO GIVE THEIR WORD	163
XXX	A MERRY DANCE	169
XXXI	KATE TURNS COLD	175
XXXII	SONG, LAUGHTER, AND SORROW	179
XXXIII	TALK WITH AN EDITOR	186
XXXIV	HITCHED TO A STAR	191
XXXV	CHAMP TELLS HIS STORY	197
XXXVI	AN UNFINISHED LETTER	203
XXXVII	INTO THE FIRE	208
XXXVIII	TINY TOM AND OLD CHAMP	214
XXXIX	IN WOLF'S CLOTHING	220
XL	TOWARD THE BORDER	226
XLI	WHEN GREEK MET GREEK	232
XLII	AT THE END OF THE RUN	238
XLIII	FOREVER AFTER	243

CHAPTER I

NO MORE DESPERADOES

On a hummock close to the corral fence stood "Happy Jack" Aberdeen. The sun shone on his young face—the last red of the dying sun.

"Here I stand on the top of the dog-gone world," said Happy Jack. "Where's the cowboy that'll get me off?"

The cow-punchers lounged about in front of the bunk house, waiting for the supper gong to strike and send its long, booming note through the evening air. The older men smoked on, indifferent to this crowing of youth; but the other youngsters pricked up their ears and began to measure him who stood on the top of the world, as he declared.

Professor Lang, looking out from the window of the living room in the ranch house, pointed toward Jack Aberdeen. He said to Marshal William Kinney, his host: "There's a splendid young chap, Kinney. There's a born athlete, I should say!"

The marshal leaned forward to look. He was a big man with a rugged face, and a rugged body, and great hands capable of holding whatever they seized upon. He had carved this ranch out of the wilderness and made it prosper; he had carved a grim fame for himself as a hunter of outlawed men; in his thirty-fifth year, he was already almost more legend than man.

"Him?" said the marshal. "Athlete? Heck!"

The professor had the mildness of a man of much thought. "No?" said he.

"Him? He's soft!" said the marshal. "Now, you watch what 'Shorty' does to him."

Shorty, wide of shoulder and deep of chest, came from the steps of the bunk house with a waddling step; he was a bulldog of a man, with the face of a bulldog, also; he wore a faint grin of anticipation as he approached. He looked like a spirit of

darkness, compared with the yellow-haired, blue-eyed boy on the mound.

"I'll wager on the handsome chap," said the professor.

"You will?" grunted the rancher. "Shorty's got thirty pounds on him, I guess."

"What's poundage? What's mere poundage?" said the professor. "It's the mind that wins, I suppose."

"Is it?" said the rancher.

He looked down at his own big wrists, brown-skinned, covered with a dark sprinkling of hair. "Is it?" said he again, and he looked up at his guest with a faint grin, and noted the hollow chest and the narrow shoulders of the man of thought. "You'll see," said he.

"You've seen them tussle before?"

"Never have. Don't have to. Anybody oughta be able to pick the winner in that fight! Shorty's bigger, older, harder, had more experience. When he puts a hand on the kid, Happy Jack will melt. You'll see! Turn to water. Huh!" He grunted and nodded.

"I doubt it," said the professor. "There's something magnificent about that young man."

"He looks all right," agreed the marshal, "but there ain't anything to him. He's a bust. He ain't got any spark in him."

"He may get one, however."

"Look at that!"

Shorty had closed with Happy Jack with a bull-like rush. The struggle was swiftly ended. The very first assault thrust Happy Jack from the hummock, staggering. He came back with a leap, laughing, and instantly the two went down, rolled over and over, and came to a rest, with Shorty on top.

"Now you watch him quit!" said the marshal.

In fact, Happy Jack flattened out, and burst into the most cheerful laughter. Shorty arose with a grunt, as the supper gong rang, and gave Happy Jack a hand to lift him up.

"You see how it is," said the marshal. "They don't take Happy serious. He's just a fool of a kid. That's all. Good natured—and that lets him out. Been of two minds about keepin'

him on, the last coupla months, he makes so many mistakes with the cows."

"Does he?" said the professor. "And yet that's a very intelligent face, Kinney."

"Face? What the deuce has faces got to do with cows?" asked the rancher in some impatience. "I want a man with a pair of hands. I don't care about his head, as long as he can listen to orders and remember 'em! Hands do the work, professor!"

The professor listened politely and nodded. He gave his attention to the gathering of the evening light, and the manner in which it flowed, in rose and crimson up the heights, and in purples and in blue tides into the hollows. He looked off to the last touch of white—the snows upon the distant summit; and he saw that virgin color dimmed suddenly, as though a great hand had smudged it across. The professor shivered.

There was never a time in this country when he was not either too hot or too cold; above all, in the evening time, prying fingers of draft and cold reached for him and made him unhappy, and his face burned from the exposure of the day and made him drowsy and feverish. He had been sent out here to rest and lead the outdoor life; and an introduction from one friend to another, and then to another, had led him eventually to this ranch of Marshal Kinney's. He had received here a careless, good-natured hospitality. He had been given horses to ride, a room to himself, and "ranch" food. He was beginning to shudder at the thought of that food—the endless procession of thin steaks, fried brown through and through and drenched in grease; of potatoes fried soggily also; of coffee that made the head swim; of half-baked bread. And now that the fall of the year was coming on, the house was always damp. The sheets into which he crawled at night were cold and clammy; he was glad that the next morning would see him off on the return journey.

He and the marshal sat in the private dining room. This was an innovation in his honor, and he knew that Kinney would much have preferred to sit at the head of the long table where

his punchers ate their meals. He was made ideally to preside at such a board, by weight of authority and by weight of hand.

The Chinese waiter came running in haste to serve them, dealt out plates and cups and saucers with a huge rattling, and slopped a platter of steaks upon the center of the round table. The marshal proceeded with his meal with his usual haste, his head bowed low, to make the lifting of the hands almost unnecessary. That was another picture which the professor would be glad to get out of his mind!

But conversation began at once. The rancher had something important on his mind.

"Soft," said he.

"You mean the potatoes?" asked the professor.

"I mean the kid."

"Happy Jack?"

"Yes. Soft. Too dang soft!"

"Nothing has happened to bring him out, perhaps," said the professor.

"If a ranch don't bring out a man, what will?" asked the marshal. "What more d'you want? Plenty of country. His style ain't cramped, I guess! No, he's soft. He's no good. Look at the way that Shorty handled him! No endurance, probably!"

He broke off and added with a grin: "But he's the richest one of the whole gang, just now."

"Rich?"

"He's got eighty dollars."

The marshal laughed, and his grim face softened a little.

"Make you laugh to think of the way those bozos throw their money away," he said. "Wind up at fifty where they started at fifteen."

"But Happy has saved eighty dollars?"

"Sure. He had to. I'll tell you how it came about. He ran into Charlie Lake one evening about six months ago. Charlie was drunk—ever hear of Charlie Lake?"

"No. Is he a rancher?"

"Him? All that he raises is trouble, professor. That's all! But the kid struck Charlie for a loan, and Charlie was drunk, as I was sayin'. He split what he had in his wallet. That was a hun-

dred and sixty bucks. The kid got eighty and had a fine party. The next day, Charlie was sober. Somebody told him what he'd done, and he went on the kid's trail. Would of ate him alive, I suppose, but some friends stopped him. The kid agreed to pay it back in six months. And Charlie'll be over in the morning for his coin, I expect."

"What if the boy didn't have the money?"

"Why, I'd have to buy him a coffin, and then go and hunt down Charlie, I suppose," said the marshal. "Have some more coffee?"

"No," said the professor with a shudder. "No more. I've really had enough already. But I've been wondering, Kinney—"

"About what?"

"About these men. There's a boy who's soft, as you say. But how soft is he, after all? What would harden him?"

"Nerve is what he needs," said the marshal.

The professor looked far away, far beyond the wall of the room, into his own thoughts. "Is that the difference between these desperadoes and ordinary men?" he asked finally.

"Desperadoes? You been reading books," said the marshal. "There ain't any such things as desperadoes. That's the trouble with you people that live inside. You get twisted on the facts. The news that gets to you back there in the East, it's traveled for three thousand miles, d'you see? And it's gained something and lost something on the way. It's gained a new face, and lost its right face. There ain't any desperadoes!"

"Men that break out of prison, for instance, and wander for months, shooting down every one who tries to capture them—men whose weapons can't miss? Aren't they desperadoes?"

"Spent half my life trailin' crooks," said the marshal. "Never seen nothing such as you talk about. Sure they bust loose, once in a while. They make some trouble. Desperate? They ain't desperate. They're ornery, that's all. And this dead-shot business, that's nonsense!" He shrugged his massive shoulders. "There simply ain't anything in it," said he.

The professor pursed his lips and was again lost in thought. "When a man has his back to the wall—" he began.

"He generally gets knocked down," said the rancher.

"And sometimes he suddenly begins to fight like a tiger," finished the professor.

"Not if I once get my hands on him," said the marshal. "If I get a grip, he melts, like the kid done, when Shorty laid hold on him!"

The professor looked at the steak plate, half empty now, and crusted at the edges with pale grease.

"Perhaps you've been fighting fire with fire and not knowing it," said he. "Perhaps you're a rather desperate man yourself, Kinney."

CHAPTER II

WHAT'S A DESPERADO?

Hearing this odd remark, Kinney stared at his guest with a good deal of amazement. Then he said:

"Look here, professor; you and me have got two kinds of eyes. You look at words and such stuff; I'm used to looking at cows and men. What you got on your mind, anyway?"

The professor smiled at him. The professor had lost a good deal of the dignity which he had brought with him from the East. He had lost his pallor, for one thing, his face being now all pink, except the nose, which was as red as the nose of a heavy drinker. He had discarded his glasses, too, for he did no reading, and, therefore, he did not really need them; but without the glasses the eyes which had appeared so penetrating and which had overawed classes of students, and even impudent reporters, now appeared dim, pale, blinking, as he searched his mind to find the secret from which his thoughts were springing. Now, therefore, he smiled at his impatient host, and blinked at him at the same time.

"You look like you were getting the range for a long-distance shot," commented Kinney.

"I am," admitted the professor. "But my theory begins with the thought that all men are very much alike—have about the same powers, I should say—"

"If I can lift twelve hundred pounds—on the level and no faking," said Kinney, with his sudden, rather savage grin, "how many pounds can your power lift, professor?"

"Perhaps a whole mountain," said the professor. "Perhaps I could lift a whole mountain."

"Now you're joking, professor," said Kinney dryly.

"Do you know how to move a mountain, Kinney?"

"No. Sure, buy blasting powder and bust the mountain to bits. Is that what you mean?"

"Can you make the powder?"

"No. I don't have to."

"You can't make the powder. I can. If the two of us were left alone in the world, you would have to carry that mountain away in twelve-hundred-pound loads, and break your back doing it. I could make powder and smash it flat."

Kinney laughed, but his laughter was short.

"I know the way that you folks figger things out," he declared. "You're always turning around the corner and coming out with a yip behind a man's honest back."

"I'm not dishonest," said the professor. "I'm simply trying to make my point—that the powers of all men more or less equalize. In other words, we're all mere human beings. What makes you a strong man is not that you can lift a few hundred pounds more than I can; because, on the other hand, you can not make powder, et cetera, as I can. I don't even admit," smiled the professor vaguely, "that you are stronger at all than I am. We each have our conceit. Yours has to do with horses, men, cows, land, and such things. Guns, too. Mine has to do with books. But let me get under the skin of this argument if I can and try to point out that you and I, essentially, are just the same."

"I don't see it," said the rancher.

The man of books intertwined his long, lean fingers, and rested his hands upon the edge of the table.

"Let me put the matter in another way," said he. "The component parts of gunpowder are not harmful. Charcoal, sulphur, saltpeter—there's nothing in that, is there? Even when they're mixed, they're only potentially strong."

"I follow the drift of that."

"But drop a spark on the powder which you've ground up and mixed with your own hands, and what happens?"

"It blows you into kingdom come, of course."

"Exactly. Drop a spark into it, and it blows you into kingdom come. Now, then, I want to spread out the comparison a little further. I said that all men were much alike. We all have the same appetites, the same emotions, the same tastes, in general."

"Show me where I'm like a Mexican, then?" asked the marshal aggressively.

"Like a Mexican," said the professor, "you are born and you have to die. You are hungry, cold, thirsty. You are happy, gay, charmed, melancholy, despairing. You suffer the exhaustion of labor; you recruit yourself again with sleep. You love virtue in women and beauty in them. You respect strength, you worship courage."

Kinney shook his head, as though admitting these things but trying to find a point at which he could differ.

"Very well," said the professor, "I don't want to corner you and make you fight back, but I do want to suggest another viewpoint to you. I say that all men are much alike. Now, take these various elements of human nature—these emotions, hopes, despairs, attractions, repulsions, and the rest. You change the man by changing the proportions and the manner in which they are mixed. Make Marshal Kinney a very jolly, cheerful man, and perhaps he would not be a rich rancher and a famous fighter, but simply a fat-and-lazy idler."

Kinney admitted the effect of the flattery by a softened eye and by grunting: "Well, get on to the point, professor."

"But the element of grimness was added to the nature of Marshal Kinney. How? By some set of circumstances, or by the simplest incident. The spark was dropped into him, and he exploded. The world rings with the report."

The rancher said slowly: "You mean that everybody's about the same, until he's given the kick?"

"I mean that, I suppose. It's not the same impulse that achieves the same result with every man. Put the whip on two slaves and one of them tries to cut your throat and the other weeps. But you never can tell. Whip the fierce one the second time and his spirit may be broken; and whip the submissive one the second time, and he may gain the energy of despair."

"Humph!" said the rancher. "I don't see where all of this is driving, professor."

"I can't help thinking," said the professor, "about that magnificent young chap we saw wrestling before supper."

"Magnificent? You mean Shorty. Yes, he's got a pair of shoul-

ders on him, and a good grip, too, though it ain't as good as some I could tell you about."

He flexed his own fingers and nodded quietly. The man was literally full of combat.

"I didn't mean Shorty," said the professor. "I mean Happy Jack, if that's his nickname."

"Him? The skinny kid?" The marshal snorted his disgust.

"Not skinny. Not a heavyweight, either. But there's a touch of quality about him."

"There ain't two men on the whole place that kid could lick," said the marshal, stretching out his hand and pointing the index finger at the man of books.

"Because he's never been developed. He never has had the spark dropped on the powder," said the professor.

"He'd never explode."

"I think he would."

"What makes you think so? Because he's got pretty blue eyes?" asked the marshal, with a touch of savage mockery in his voice. "I tell you, the kid ain't worth a whoop!"

"Ah, well," said the professor, "one of these days, something may happen, and when he's cornered—"

"You seen what happened when Shorty cornered him. He just laid down and died. He quit. He ain't got the spunk!"

"There wasn't any necessity," said the professor.

"He was fightin', wasn't he?"

"They were only exercising. There was no fight about that."

The marshal turned a dark red. "I'd be danged before I'd lie still when I was put on my back," said he. "I'd be danged before I'd quit cold."

The professor shrugged. "However," said he, "I'll cling to my theory. What a man won't do for the sake of winning a wrestling bout, he'd do for the sake of his life, say?"

The marshal put back his head and laughed scornfully.

"You got a lot of funny ideas in your head," said he. "Sparks —men that are powder magazines—desperadoes—"

"A desperado," said the professor, "is a man who has offered himself to death. He despairs of life. Therefore, he salts and savors every remaining day of his existence with the taste of

death. The desperado is the rare fellow who is not crushed by the hostility of the world, but is fortified, strengthened, increased by it."

He paused. The feeling that he might be making ridiculous statements made him change color a little and put his head higher.

"Put the proper pressure on this fellow, and by heaven, Kinney, he might be a desperado himself!"

"The kid?"

"Yes."

"You mean that skinny young loon, that softhead, Happy Jack Aberdeen?"

This continued running down of his hero made the professor so angry that he answered coldly:

"Achilles was a smaller man than Ajax, but a much greater one. I could even conceive, marshal, that this same slender youngster might be able to stand face to face with you."

Kinney flushed again, a richer, brighter crimson. He was one of those men who are maddened by the least suggestion of a physical challenge, and he said now:

"I'll tell you what—he won't have to tackle me. I'll give him something easier. I'll turn loose Charlie Lake on him. You want to see him cornered and—"

"No, no," said the professor, horrified.

"You want to see the spark dropped on him? I'll drop a spark. I'll take his eighty dollars out of his blanket roll, and then let him stand up to Charlie Lake."

"Kinney," said the professor, "of course you realize that I'm only theorizing—a harmless diversion, surely. You wouldn't actually make—"

The marshal dropped his fist upon the table, and it shuddered with the impact. "There's too dang much theorizing, among some of you gents," said he. "And I'm gunna bring this here case down to the facts."

"Great Scott," said the professor, his voice made quiet with horror. "Do you realize that you may cause a fight and then—"

"Fight? The kid'll run a thousand miles if Charlie Lake frowns at him!"

CHAPTER III

CHARLIE LAKE COMES TO COLLECT

THERE is a power in names, and the nickname which is bestowed by chance may become true out of his own strength of suggestion. Many a man has become indolent because some careless observer called him "lazy," and many a cheerful man has grown dark because he was termed "gloomy." But Happy Jack Aberdeen needed no nickname to make him merry. He could not be downhearted. His life of hard labor and small pay made no impression upon his mind. His dark future and his inglorious past made no difference to him, for he lived like a bird in a tree, from day to day, never thinking of the future, never thinking of yesterday.

This is the sort of companion that most men love to have about them, and, therefore, Happy Jack never lacked for friends. He did not need to have money in order to enjoy a trip to town, for there were always companies which were glad to include him at their own expense.

Such men always have little incidental accomplishments, and Happy Jack had them, too. In a small way, he was a juggler. He could snatch four or five fragile teacups from a table and spin them in the air like lightning, or send a flight of hunting knives twisting and circling perilously, always descending as by magic, handle down, to be flicked upward again. Or he could make objects of strange sizes disappear from the midst of the air, and pluck them again from the hair, or the ear, or even the mouth of a friend. These tricks were sure to amaze and delight the cow-punchers about him, and they were not his only resource. The clever Happy Jack was a musician, also.

He carried about with him a guitar, from job to job, from bunk house to bunk house, and on that guitar he could perform wonderfully, and sing Negro songs, and Mexican wailing

ballads, and galloping cowboy songs, and even a few Italian airs, produced with a pronunciation even more rare and wonderful than his juggling feats. If there were a violin at hand, he could play dance music on it, or compose little fantasies of his own which the bunk house swore were equal to the best; but, above all, he was applauded when he lay on his bunk at night and imitated the songs of birds. For he could whistle with real skill, and sometimes it seemed that a blackbird had risen literally from the floor of the bunk house, and again that a meadow lark was showering her notes over a fresh green April field. He had heard the mocking bird sing his sweetest, and knew the oriole's note, and the finch, and the wren, and even the great-throated nightingale sometimes seemed to have perched on the shoulder of this man of wonders.

This, even, was not the end of his talents.

This man of genius could put down with the pencil all the sights that his eyes had fallen upon, and many and many an evening the men crowded about him and stared bewildered, delighted, over his shoulder as he scratched his pictures upon rough sheets of brown wrapping paper, with a pencil, a pen, or even with a bit of charcoal, smudging in outlines and backgrounds with the strokes of his thumb.

It was no wonder that he was admired. More than that, he was almost loved.

Almost, because there was something careless, indifferent, birdlike, about him in his way of living and his habit of thought as there was in his whistling. He could not stay on a job more than a few months. Then he drifted off like a true migratory creature.

In the winter he winged his way south; in the summer he traveled by easy stages north. In the spring he sought the happiest valleys, in the autumn the richest orchard lands. He was a taster of life, a connoisseur who gave to everything no more than enough to enjoy it. He was of all creatures the laziest, the idlest, the most capable of lying in the sun and forgetting that the night might be cold or the sky might presently let down chill showers.

This very quality endeared him, in a sense, to the wandering,

semivagrant men of the cattle range. But, at the same time, they could not form any strong bonds with him. He gave to every man his hand and his smile, but he gave to no man his inmost soul, and that is what is wanted by your Westerner before he is willing to call you "friend." He wants to see you as you are, in a serious moment, because he is preëminently a very serious man himself.

These qualities in Happy Jack which made him welcome wherever he went, which made men smile the instant that he entered a room and made them keep him almost by force when he wanted to leave, were also the qualities which fenced him away from all friendships. Men took him as gladly, and as lightly, as a bird on the wing, for that was what he practically was.

He was aware of the fact that he was skimming the mere surface of life; but he had not, as yet, seen anything about it that demanded a more profound attention. He never had been greatly stirred. He had never seen a man or a woman whom he cared to remember from one year's end to the other. He was continually turning the page and forgetting what had gone before. He was like a vaudevillian, constantly appearing upon different stages, rarely seen twice by the same audience.

He sat up late this night describing an adventure he had had during the day with an old cow, bogged down at the side of a tank; and he brought yells of laughter from the punchers as he produced on great scraps of stout paper life-size caricatures of the expression of the poor beast when he was tailing her up, and finally her wild charge when she found herself free to turn upon her tormenter, and how the mud had flown from her hoofs, and how he and his pony had fled wildly away before her.

These things delighted his audience, and it was late when the foreman showed his grim face inside the door.

"You waddies, you think to-morrow's Sunday?"

They groaned, but they turned in at once. They knew the blasting speed with which the cook's call ended their sleep!

Happy Jack turned in, also. He reached under his pillow, made sure that his wallet was there, and pinched fondly the

fatness of it. Then his eyes closed. And he was instantly asleep.

The morning came before his eyes had been well closed, as it seemed to him. A cheerful friend dragged the covers from his bunk. And another snapped a wet towel at him, until he sprang up, with a laugh, and hastily began his dressing.

He was the last out, the last at breakfast; he lingered the longest over his food because, of course, he was a favorite with the cook; and he was the last man to finish his cigarette; the last man to catch his horse in the corral; the last to saddle, the last to ride out, trailing far behind the others.

The foreman came back to him, and cursed.

"You gotta wake up, Jack. The boss has his eye on you. He don't like the way that you're carrying on."

"Don't he?" said Happy Jack.

And he shrugged. Instantly his mind wandered south. It was almost time for him to begin his migration in pursuit of the sun!

However, he went through his morning's duties with as much care as usual, which was not much, and he came back with the rest of the punchers for lunch.

There he saw a figure which he had been expecting, the sour face and the brutal little pig eyes of Charlie Lake. Charlie had come for his money.

He stood up. There was nothing distinguished about Charlie except his brutality. It appeared in his face, in his gait, in his manner. It appeared in his crimes, also. He seemed to love violence for its own sake. When he rode abroad, the flanks of his horse showed the ferocity of his nature.

He was accepted by the incoming punchers with careless nods and a few muttered words. It was dangerous to be rude to this brute. It was also unpleasant to be cordial to him, and, therefore, he was strictly avoided.

He cared nothing for that. He was accustomed to it, and he glowered about him at the men, without deigning other reply than a few jerks of his head now and then.

But when young Jack Aberdeen came in, Charlie Lake raised his left hand and crooked the forefinger significantly. It was an insult to be hailed in such a silent, contemptuous manner, but

the boy was not burdened with foolish pride. No man ever had done him physical harm, and it never entered into his mind that any man ever would. He was a sort of public entertainer, and thereby a public servant. It was not on the books that he could be brutally treated. And if, now and again, a bully rose to threaten him, he could afford to sit back and shrug his shoulders, because others were always ready to fight his battles for him.

In one word, Happy Jack was a spoiled child, and with the assurance of a spoiled child, he approached the man of guns and hailed him.

Charlie Lake looked him over with an air of gloomy disgust. He said at last: "You know why I'm here?" That was his first greeting. Always a beast, on this morning Charlie Lake was more beastly than usual. The poison of cheap whisky of the night before had charred the last touches of human decency from his soul.

"I dunno," said Happy Jack. "Likely that you're over here for the mornin' air, or else, that you wanted to try out the cookin' here, which after all, it ain't as prime as some that I've ate after."

"You think that I come for that?" said Charlie Lake, his eyes flashing.

"Why, I don't know," said Happy Jack, and he smiled around at the others. "What else would bring you here?"

Jack Aberdeen could notice a difference when he looked around at his bunkies. They did not respond in the manner which he was accustomed to see, but every man hastily looked elsewhere, and seemed suddenly occupied. It was as though they did not know that Charlie Lake had ridden in. One was busy at the wash pan; another was pumping up a bucket of water, and another was splicing a broken bridle.

Such business was not their way at noon.

And suddenly Happy Jack was mystified. It was as though these punchers who had been so friendly now had lost all care about him. It was as though he were a column of mist which they could not see.

He was puzzled and worried by this change.

"I'll tell you what brought me here, kid," said Charlie Lake. "I come here for eighty dollars of my money that you sneaked out of my pocket six months ago. And I want it back. I've waited till the day I named! Now hand it over!"

His nostrils flared and his eyes gleamed as he spoke. Plainly he did not expect the money, and plainly he would take compensation of another sort.

"Wait two seconds," said the boy, "and I'll pay you in full, old-timer!"

CHAPTER IV

A BIRD BECOMES A BIRD OF PREY

THAT announcement caused Charlie Lake to scowl bitterly.

As the boy disappeared into the bunk house, Charlie demanded: "What's the kid been doing? Having a lucky turn at poker?"

No one answered.

Suddenly, Charlie pitched from the box he was sitting on to his feet. His voice rose into a squeak, like the voice of a bull terrier.

"Look here, dang you all, did I ask a question? Do I get an answer?"

One or two ugly words were covertly exchanged by the punchers, but nothing was answered except by the foreman, who made a wry face and then said:

"The kid never wins at cards. He's been saving to pay you off."

"He's saved eighty dollars? I never heard of a puncher that saved eighty dollars," said Charlie Lake. "He's a crook. He's picked somebody's pocket, the way that he picked mine. He's got the look of one of these here pickpockets, anyway. One of them mangy low-lifers!"

Happy Jack came sauntering from the bunk-house door, the wallet in his hand.

"Here you are, Charlie," said he. "Take a look at it and count it, will you?"

"Aye. I'll take a look at it, and I'll count it, too. Most likely it's queer. And if you're tryin' to shove the queer on me, I'll skin you!"

Happy Jack laughed. "There's a gent with a sore head," said he.

"Who's got a sore head?" snapped Charlie Lake fiercely.

"Aw, quit it," said the good-natured boy. "Nobody's stepping on your toes as hard as that, I guess."

Charlie Lake opened the wallet, and took from it—a thin sheaf of newspaper clippings! He looked up at the face of the boy, which had gone blank indeed.

"Is this my pay?" said he slowly, drawing in his breath in a strange way as he spoke.

"Why—somebody's done a switch on me," said the boy. "Somebody's—somebody's—why—"

"Is this my pay?" repeated Charlie Lake.

Happy Jack could say nothing.

"Then here's the first part of my receipt," said Charlie Lake, and lurching forward, he drove a smashing blow against the face of Aberdeen with disastrous effect.

Happy Jack went down as though he had been clubbed. The violence of the blow rolled him over, stunned, and he could hardly have regained his feet at once if a violent kick from Charlie Lake had not helped him.

He stood up, staggering. Red was running down his face. It entered his gaping mouth, and the taste of it was salt.

"I'm gunna beat you to a pulp," announced Charlie Lake, his fists gripped. "After that, I'm gunna skin you, you sneakin' crook!"

The boy turned his head toward the others.

But these fair-weather friends remained stationary. There was more than one knit brow, more than one doubled fist, but no one spoke to him, no one moved to intervene, and suddenly he understood.

Many a time before he had been rescued from some ruffian, but those were men of fisticuffs, alone, and Charlie Lake was a two-gun man. Those guns hung low down on his thighs, easily in gripping range of his fingers, and he might meet intervention of any sort with bullets.

So, suddenly, the boy realized that he was alone, single-handed, as completely as though he and Charlie Lake were in a vast desert, with no human being within sight.

And Lake at that moment rushed again. Instinctively, the boy stepped aside, and the bull fury of Lake carried him past.

He recovered, whirled, and struck again, not a blind and clumsy swing, but a pile-driver straight-arm punch, aimed at the chin of the youngster.

Happy Jack ducked, and the next instant his chest struck the chest of Lake, he was in the mighty arms of the gunman.

"I'll paint your pretty face for you," said Charlie Lake, laughing horribly. "I'll make you a new face, by gravy!"

With one hand, he held the boy. The other hand he raised, like a battering club.

And Happy Jack reached up and caught that poised destruction. By the wrist he gripped "Gunman Charlie," and as he caught hold of the man, from the touch a new power ran down into his body, into his heart.

Every muscle in his frame leaped. And every nerve burned, and his mind cleared suddenly, as though a film had been snatched away from before his eyes.

It was not only that he could see clearly, but he could see with wonderful speed, and in a single glance he could behold the faces of all the men around him, and the blue of the sky, and the white puff of cloud which was drifting up above the corner of the bunk-house roof; and the trail of smoke that sagged from the top of the cook's chimney; and the mist of dust which hung over the milling horses in the corral, where a wild mustang was careening.

He saw these things, and, furthermore, he saw the face of Charlie Lake, turned to a fierce bewilderment.

The hand of Charlie, also, tugged and twisted and writhed in vain, but it could not escape. It was as though an electric current flowed through the fingers of Happy Jack, and held the wrist of Charlie as a magnetic current sticks to iron.

Furthermore, that embracing arm whose strength had been crushing him was now like the pressure from the arm of a child.

"Why, dang you—" gasped Charlie.

And the boy knew that the monster had shriveled, and had become less, and that the power of Charlie Lake was as nothing, compared with his.

It gave him, also, a peculiar contempt for the man, as well as a wonder at the miracle which had been performed in his

own being. He cast Charlie Lake from him, and the gunman went backward a staggering step or two.

"You—" shouted Lake. And then a gun winked into his hand, like a gleaming sickle of silver. The boy stepped in, and he struck, not over-hard, upon the snarling mouth of the gun fighter. Charlie Lake pitched backward and rolled in the dust. His gun exploded; the sense of smoke was in the nostrils of the boy, and the gun was at his feet.

He picked it up and saw Charlie coming to his knees, tugging at his second weapon.

"You jackass," said the boy calmly, "drop that gun or I'll kill you!"

A curse barked on the lips of Lake as the second gun jumped from its holster, and all of this young Happy Jack Aberdeen saw and waited upon before he moved in answer; for there was no slightest doubt in his mind that he could be first with his bullet, and that that bullet could strike where he wanted it to strike. It was as though he had received a supernatural assurance.

And slowly though he had made his movement, still he had time to pause and consider.

He could drive the slug through the right shoulder of this ravening being and so cripple him now and forever, or he could crush in the forehead of the man with a slug.

Only one instant he hesitated, and then he chose to kill.

Deliberately, coldly, he chose to take that life, and the very knowledge that the taking of it lay within his power was such a joy to him as he never had known before. He fired. The head of Charlie Lake jerked back, as though he had been tugged suddenly by the hair from behind.

Then he sank upon his side and lay still. The mark was there in the center of the forehead, and the boy leaned over and looked quietly, to make sure. He had not missed. He could not miss. It was as though a wire had been drawn from his gun to the head of Lake, and down that wire the lightning bolt had slid.

Every horrible detail of that event he looked down quietly upon; even upon the bubbles which formed slowly on the lips

of the dead man, and then burst and left the face blackened with the dust.

And, after that, he stepped back quickly.

He looked around him at the circle of frozen faces, for something told him that another man might challenge him.

More, much more than that, something shouted aloud in him with a vast hunger to be satisfied, which could only be contented by more slaughter. It was not, he suddenly knew, that he dreaded lest another should champion the cause of the dead man, but an actual craving that such intervention should be attempted.

Here was the gun, warm in his hand, that would give a second answer. And suddenly he was laughing a little, very softly, and looking from face to face.

What he said then was remembered long after, when this day became historic in the West, as all famous beginnings are important.

"That wasn't so hard," said Happy Jack.

It was not hard. It was no more difficult than the snuffing of a candle, and yet the result, how important, how vast!

Let who would content himself with creation. He, Jack Aberdeen, preferred the exquisite pleasure of extinction. He had made a pencil stroke, and thereby he had canceled a life.

He had heard that other men felt horror and remorse for such deeds, but there was no horror, there was no remorse, there was nothing but abounding joy in the whole soul and in the body of the boy. So he stood before his companions and laughed, and he saw in their faces pallor, shrinking, some disgust, and a great, nameless fear.

No, he had seen that fear before.

He had seen it in the eyes of a dog, unexpectedly trapped and cornered by the spring of a puma, suddenly realizing the full danger at whose heels it had been running and yelping the moment before. So they were to him, in that moment, transformed into dogs, and he the lion before them.

"Somebody'd better tell the boss," said he.

Then he went into the bunk house and sat down on his bunk. He looked down at the warm gun in his hand. He

opened his fingers and regarded it with a new, companionable curiosity, and he saw that there were two notches filed into the handle.

From the tool chest in the corner, absently, he took a small file, and he began to sink another notch, just beneath the other two!

CHAPTER V

BUT THE BIRD STILL SINGS

Outside the bunk house, voices murmured like bees; then all other voices ceased, and one booming note dominated. An instant later, the form of Bill Kinney blocked the doorway, and the boy looked up to him and wondered why he did not feel the usual awe. The luster of the fame of Bill Kinney had been enough to half blind him before, and to fill him with fear; but now he was at ease. Charlie Lake had filled him with fear to a hardly lesser degree, and yet Charlie Lake had turned out to be a putty image. Perhaps this craggy fellow was not much more real!

So he looked up from his work on the revolver and calmly regarded the marshal.

The latter hung there in the doorway for a moment. He had not believed the frightened report which had been brought to him. He had not possibly been able to credit it. And now he looked into the bunk house and saw enough to bewilder him; for it was the same young face and the same young form, but the eyes were different, the spirit was different. He could feel it even in the distance, and he could feel it yet more distinctly when he stepped closer.

He towered above the youth and said to him in a voice of thunder: "What in heck have you been doing?"

Young Happy Jack smiled in the dark face of the marshal: "Shooting pigs, Kinney," said he.

There were two things that upset the marshal. In the first place he felt the aptness of the comparison between Charlie Lake and a pig—a wild and dangerous boar, say; in the second place, it was the first time that one of his hired men had failed to call him "mister."

It was his pride that he was rarely addressed, rarely even

thought of, except with a title. He was Mr. Kinney, or he was Marshal Kinney. And in that free-and-easy period in that free-and-easy country, he took as much pleasure in those titles as ever a peer did in being called "my lord," or "your grace." Far off, when his name appeared not infrequently in the newspapers of the East, the South, and the North, he was always referred to as Bill Kinney. By that name he had become an heroic form. But the newspapers closer at hand had learned their lesson.

They spoke of "Federal Marshal William Kinney," or "The famous William Kinney, marshal of this district." And no matter how often his name had to appear in an article, he never became Bill Kinney, certainly he never was shortened to Kinney, alone. For that matter, there were not three men in the world who were such close friends of the marshal that they presumed to call him by one name alone, either the first or the last.

But here was a beardless youth who smiled blithely in his face and had said: "Shooting pigs, Kinney."

The shock of that struck him as a bullet strikes.

"Am I getting old?" asked the marshal of himself.

"Have I turned into a weak-wit or a fool, that the kids dare to stand up and sass me like this?"

And, therefore, he became more gruff than was his need or even his custom.

He said: "You've done a murder, young feller. D'you know that? Stand up and come with me."

"How come?" asked the boy.

And with the file, he gave a last touch to the third notch, and put the gun away in his clothes.

The marshal could not believe his ears. Suddenly he thundered: "Stand up!"

The boy lifted his head slowly. "Are you tellin' me to do that?" he asked. "Or is the law telling me?"

The thunderstruck marshal almost reached for the shoulder of Happy Jack. Then he recalled himself; it was his first principle never to overstep the actual province which the law assigned to him.

"You're arrested, in the name of the law!" said he.

"Well," said the boy, "I dunno that it's your right to arrest me; I've an idea that the sheriff ought to do that! But as long as the law may be on your side—"

With the rest of his defiance to be implied, he slowly rose, and sauntered past Kinney toward the door.

"And what's the next step?" he asked. "Town? Jail? And all the rest?"

"Go to the house and wait for me there," said the marshal hoarsely.

The boy turned and looked at him, as though even then he half wished to resent this rudeness of tone; but after this, he went calmly away toward the house.

The marshal paused behind him to give certain directions about the disposal of the body and to gather first-hand evidence.

Boone, the foreman, looking rather pale and sick, narrated the facts.

"Self-defense?" asked the marshal.

"Nothin' but," said the foreman. "He knocked Aberdeen down. Aberdeen got up, and they grabbed each other. He started to smash up Aberdeen. But he wasn't able to. He pulled a gun—and Aberdeen took that gun away and shot him with it—"

He paused and passed a hand across his forehead.

"There's one thing more. I stood where I could see Aberdeen's face, at the last minute. I swear that he was as cool as you are now! And when he pulled the trigger, he was smiling!" He shrugged. "It don't seem to mean much, telling it like this, but you can bet your boots that it meant something to stand by and see it. It give me a chill that even whisky couldn't cure!"

The marshal stared at him. "You talk like a fool!" he declared, and stalked on toward the house.

His own mind was in the maddest whirl that ever had bewildered him. He was guilty of this killing, in a sense, because he knew that, deliberately, he had given the provocation for it; but his conscience was not greatly troubled by that fact. He

could have sworn that the boy never would have dared to stand up to famous Charlie Lake. The miracle had happened. And happening as it had—

He turned on his heel to go back and question the foreman again. And Boone already was coming after him!

"What you want to say?" asked the marshal.

"I seen that you wanted to ask something about Aberdeen. So I come after you."

"I want to know this: When the fracas started, was the kid scared?"

"Aberdeen?" said the foreman, who seemed unable to recognize any nickname applied to Happy Jack. "He looked scared to death. He just stood, while Lake walked up and smashed him in the face and knocked him down. I thought that Lake was going to eat him up. I—I was about to sashay in and pry 'em apart—if I could! Then all at once Aberdeen was the boss, and Lake was like a baby in his hands. He took hold of Charlie Lake—"

He paused, breathing hard. "You know Lake? You ever seen him wrestling, or in a tug of war?"

The marshal nodded, biting his lip.

"He took hold of Charlie Lake and threw him off. Then he knocked him flat when Lake started to pull a gun. I never seen anything faster and neater— Say, Mr. Kinney, who is Aberdeen?"

And the marshal slowly answered, because the words were drawn out of his soul by wonder: "I dunno. Maybe he don't know his own self."

After that, he resumed his way to the house.

The professor might be able to explain this still further. If he could persuade that man to postpone his departure until the next day, the marshal was willing, now, to practically sit at the knees of the man of learning and drink in his wisdom; for a miracle had been performed, and that miracle had been announced beforehand by Professor Walter Lang. And this was not the age of miracles; it was the age of common sense, when two and two must make four, and never four million!

It was no wonder that the hard-headed Kinney felt a little

dizzy, a little sick, as he went on. The heat of the sun, the color of the sky, the very face of his own house now appeared to him as new as things seen for the very first time! He could not recognize them, any more than he had been able to recognize Happy Jack Aberdeen, when he saw that youth sitting in the bunk house, filing a notch on the handle of a Colt revolver of ancient pattern!

He paused again with his hand on the knob of the door, not knowing why he hesitated.

And at this moment the sweet, swift strumming of a guitar issued from the front room, and he heard the rich, strong voice of Happy Jack singing:

"Have you ever heard the story of Cheyenne Pete,
That was known for the speed of his hands and his feet?
He was all broke down and he had the spavin
And the size of his shoes they was number eleven.
But when that cowboy begun to step
There was nothin' left to do excep'
To give him room and hold the ladies
That sure would of—"

The marshal opened the door and stepped into the room. There on the piano stool sat his prisoner, guitar on knee, head tilted back in song; and lounging on the other side of the room appeared the professor, smiling with enjoyment.

Well might he smile! But did he know how his prophecy had worked?

"Shut up!" said the marshal to the boy.

In midline, Happy Jack broke off, with a wave of his hand.

"You're the boss here," said he, "and I seem to be the guest of the house, eh?" He laughed as he spoke.

"You, Lang," said the rancher, "you know what's happened?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Lang. "I've heard that one of the dogs went mad and had to be shot—"

The big man raised his hand to stop the rest of the sentence.

"The dog that was killed was wearin' a hat and shoes, professor," said he seriously.

Lang got slowly to his feet. He looked wildly at the rancher and again at Happy Jack. The latter was playing his guitar again, with muted touches, and looking absently out the window as he recalled a pleasant air.

"You mean that the boy, here, shot—"

"Oh, yes. He shot Charlie Lake."

"And hurt him badly?"

"He'll never need to be hurt again," said the grim marshal. "And it seems to me that you and me had better have a little talk with the killer!"

CHAPTER VI

PROFESSOR LANG LECTURES

Absolute honesty was with the sheriff a matter of professional pride. He held that men lie because they are afraid to tell the truth, and since he never had been afraid, he never had lied. It was true when he was a child, even. He preferred to take a flogging, his teeth set, and his eyes flaming dry, bright defiance, rather than tell a simple lie and escape scot-free. He never had lied to gain favor, and he never had lied to magnify his fame.

If he made a narration of his deeds, that narration was sure to contain not one scruple of exaggeration. In a sense, he was so truthful because he felt that he despised applause and that he performed great deeds not because of the headlines that the papers carried afterward, but because he could give himself a bit of approbation. As a matter of fact, he usually read newspaper tributes to himself with a sneer of scorn; he despised flatterers; he hated the manner in which they magnified his own simple reports.

And, therefore, in this new crisis, the marshal had no intention of covering up the truth. He said to the prisoner:

"You won't have much trouble about this, I guess. But I want to tell you the facts. You can use them, if you want to, when the judge questions you, or they bring you out before the jury, if the case ever gets that far, which I pretty well doubt."

He looked at the professor. The latter nodded.

The light hand of the boy paused upon the guitar strings.

"Look here," said he, "there ain't any use in your parboiling yourselves on account of this scrape. It's over and done with. Nobody's going to bother me about it. It was self-defense."

He laughed a little as he said this, and looked out the win-

dow again, while his fingers drew from the steel strings the almost inaudible murmur of:

> He was all broke down, and he had the spavin,
> And the size of his shoes, they was number eleven—

"Aberdeen!" roared the marshal.

"Well?"

"Am I a fool already, or are you just tryin' to make one out of me?"

"You ain't a fool of my makin', as yet," said the boy, with this strange, new insolence of his.

And he laughed again, and looked in amusement at the marshal, and through him. He seemed to be taking him up in his hand, and weighing him, and finding him a thing as light as a dead leaf.

Even the professor could feel the danger which floated in the air, and he looked with a tremor from one of these people to the other. He had lost his glow of pride in the knowledge that his miracle had actually been performed. For now he could see that miracle in operation, and the sight of it dampened his spirit and filled him with awe. The sun fell upon the golden hair of the boy and turned it to fire; his eyes were a blue fire, too, pale and burning. His whole body seemed to the professor like a quivering thunderbolt of energy, swift and strong enough to shatter walls of steel.

He had felt, at other times, that he never had met, before, such might of body, of iron will, as that of the rancher, Kinney, but now he was in doubt. To use his own comparison of the evening before, if one were Ajax, the other seemed a new Achilles.

The marshal, in answer to the last rude and light remark, returned a scowl. Then he said grimly: "You had eighty bucks to pay off Charlie Lake."

"Sure I did," said the boy.

"It disappeared?"

"It did."

"Who took it?"

"I dunno. I don't care," said Happy Jack. "It was due to

Charlie Lake. He can't spend it. So I don't care what sneak swiped it."

"I'm the sneak," said the rancher courageously.

"You're the sneak?"

"I took that money."

"Ah?" said the boy.

And he leaned back against the window sill, still touching a harmony upon the steel strings of the guitar, though the sound was so nearly inaudible that the professor could hear it only now and again, in murmurs softer than imagined music in the mind.

"I'll tell you about it," went on Kinney. "The professor, yonder, took a fancy to you. Thought that there was something to you. I said you was soft. I pointed out the way that Shorty rolled you, the other evening. He said that all you needed was something to pull you together—electric spark—I dunno all that he meant. But I gathered that to get you cornered was the main thing. So I thought that Charlie Lake could do the cornering. I was right. He did the cornering. The professor was right, too. When you were cornered, you turned into something new. Well, I'm really the one that caused Charlie Lake to be killed. I played sneak thief and took the money. Here it is."

He held out a sheaf of money, but the boy shuddered.

"I'd rather keep a dead man's hand in my pocket than that stuff," said he. "You keep it, will you?"

And he struck out a ripping discord on the strings with a tear of his thumb across them.

The rancher threw the money upon the center table; his puncher was no longer facing him, but was turned toward the professor with a keenly inquiring eye.

"Now, Aberdeen," said Kinney, "it's up to you to do what you want. I'll sit down here and make you a signed statement of these here facts, if you want!"

The boy hardly glanced at his employer.

"And get yourself slammed in jail, maybe? Or get your title of marshal peeled off your head? What good would that be to me? I ain't sorry that Charlie Lake is dead. I'd just as soon kill him again. I'd do it for the fun of it—a rat like him!"

And again that soft laughter, easy and light as the laughter of a woman, flowed from his lips.

Bill Kinney was a hard man, an experienced man, one to whom crime was an open book, and the ways of criminals; but he moistened his dry lips, now, as he stared at this handsome boy.

The latter had fixed his attention solely upon the professor.

"I want to know," said he.

"About what?" asked Walter Lang, growing very nervous.

"About myself."

"What can I tell you, young man?"

"Danged if I know. But you knew something. What was it?"

The professor closed his eyes for a moment in thought.

Then he said: "It's something that I can't very well explain."

"Try, though."

"You want me to even put out guesses?"

"Aye," said the boy, "I want you to. Because I can't even guess about myself. Something's happened. I been high-lifed. I dunno how!"

"I had a roommate in college," said the professor. "He used to work out for the football team. He couldn't make it. Everything about him was wrong. His running was too slow. He tackled softly. He couldn't hit the line hard. He always misjudged punts."

"That's a long way from Happy Jack," growled the marshal, beginning to be impatient.

"Let him alone," said Happy Jack Aberdeen. "Maybe this is what I want to know."

"One day on the scrub eleven he was at tackle. The coach was working his star halfback on a certain overtackle play. And he wanted to get his star letter perfect. So he slammed the star three times at my dub of a roommate. Two times they played, and two times the great halfback went scorching through, stepping on the dub tackle's face.

"The third time he came in the same way, when all at once the dub knocked the guard away with his shoulder, dived through the tackle, and hit the star so hard that he didn't come to for half an hour. The ball rolled away. A heap fell on it.

When they pulled the great heap apart, the dub was lying there on the ball!

"Well, he became a star. He only had half a season to play in, but he filled the campus with his fame, I'll tell you!

"I could go on giving other instances. There are men, for example, who seem to be asleep. Suddenly they write a great book. Something that we don't know about has happened to change their brains. Something too small to be noticed, let's say!

"But from that moment on, it's a new man at work. Walter Scott was over forty when he wrote his first novel, for instance. So was Fielding. They'd done nothing really first-rate, or anywhere near first-rate, before that. Napoleon started his life with a series of ridiculous fiascos in Corsica. Suddenly, at Toulon, he shows that the right combination has been made in his brain. He's in tune with himself, and instantly he's great. We see these changes going on all the time. There's some mysterious psychological truth and principle behind it that I can't enunciate. I'm working at it now. If I can get it, then I'll have the most invaluable secret in the world to pass out to other men!

"It isn't a frenzy that I'm talking about, though there are elements of frenzy in it. A hundred-pound madman can throw a two-hundred-pound guard out the window. Why? The day before a child could have knocked him down. Now he's a bundle of vast power. Why? Because our most vital strength is nerve strength. It is the flood of nerve strength that enables a man to rise to a great crisis. That is what permits him to surpass himself. A policeman in Pennsylvania was shot through the head—bullet went just under the brain. But he kept on fighting and downed two crooks! I know of a man who plucked out four-by-fours which were freshly spiked down—he wanted to get at his child, who was lodged in the water under a little footbridge. The next day, he could not budge one of those four-by-fours which still remained. He could not even stir them!

"Ecstasy is the thing. It is in all men. It is the lightning in humanity. If only we can control it and teach it when and where to strike! The great men of the earth have possessed it, mentally, from time to time. A few great athletes have shown it, from time

to time. And, unquestionably, something has happened to you, Aberdeen. I must have seen the possibility of that happening last evening, instinctively, and not by any process of reason!

"That's all that I can tell you at present, Aberdeen. I'm going to try to think it over. I can't give you anything definite, as yet. But you've been made a happy man!"

CHAPTER VII

MARSHAL KINNEY RIDES

At this strange and half-mysterious doctrine, the boy suddenly broke out into laughter.

"I'll tell you, professor," said he, "what you mean is that most of us are trying to run uphill with the brakes on."

"Brakes?" said the professor.

"Fear, I mean," said Happy Jack Aberdeen. "Take the fear away and you give a man something. To-day I stood there in front of Charlie Lake fair paralyzed. Because I was afraid, my muscles wouldn't work. But he was a whisky soak. He wasn't as strong as he looked. He wasn't as strong as he had the name of being. Why, his arm was like the arm of a baby. There was no power in it. Well, that was when I lost my fear. And that's why he's dead, instead of me; and that's the answer to everything, it looks like, instead of all of the fancy arguments that you have about it, professor!"

He laughed again.

"I feel as though I could bust down a wall," said he.

"You'll have a chance," broke in the marshal sourly. "You'll be sleeping inside of the jail to-night. Unless you can find somebody to go bail for you."

"Thanks," said the boy. "I wouldn't mind a good, warm jail. I've been in one before, and I've always liked it fine. Only—what sort of chuck do they turn up at your own private jail, Kinney?"

That familiar name jarred upon the proud nature of the marshal and brought to his face a flush which few had been privileged to see; and most of those had been crushed by weight of hand or bullets immediately afterward.

But the boy was unabashed; he even turned and winked at the professor.

"We'll start pronto," said the marshal. "Go get your blankets!"

"I'll do that," said Happy Jack. "So long. I'll be back in a minute. Do I ride my own cutting hoss in, or do you take me in irons, in the buckboard?"

The marshal hesitated, as though he were on the verge of making some savage retort. But then he answered curtly: "Get your hoss!"

The boy left the room.

The professor, at that, as though the full drama of the situation only came home to him at that moment, got up and began to pace about the room.

"Lake is dead!" said he.

The marshal grunted. His mighty head had fallen a little, and his face was dark with thought.

"And—it doesn't seem possible!" said the professor. "A trained gun fighter—wiped out by that boy—"

"Lake had it coming to him," said the marshal. "And no man can keep winning forever!"

"Do you call it mere accident?" asked the professor.

"Dang it, man," said the marshal, annoyed, "there ain't any such thing as one of those dead-shot Dicks that people are so fond of talking about. There ain't such a thing. A Colt revolver is a damn good gun, and everybody west of the Mississippi and a sight of 'em on the other side are bound to swear by it; but just the same it's more of a chance than a poker game. If you land one shot out of six inside of the rim of the target, you're lucky."

"Then some people have a great share of the luck," said Walter Lang, and he smiled. "Including yourself, marshal!"

The marshal shrugged his huge shoulders.

"I ain't had luck," said he. "I've only had the luck that goes to a sober man. Most of these thugs, yeggs, and gunmen are half filled with red-eye before they begin to get ready for a fight. They prime themselves with alcohol until their brains ain't worth a cent, and their eyes have a cloud over 'em. When they're that way, so's they don't care whether they live or die, they out with their guns and start smearing lead around. Some-

body gets killed, or laid up. But it usually takes ten pounds of lead to do the trick. I don't drink much ever, and never when I'm on duty. That's where my luck comes in."

"Was Lake drunk, and the boy sober?" asked the professor.

"Lake was after being drunk. That's the biggest reason, of course."

"Do you think it's the only one?"

The marshal made a sweeping gesture, as though he wanted to brush the discussion aside but could not quite succeed.

"I don't want to think no more about it," said he. "The kid goes to jail. That's all that I know just now!"

He rose to end the talk and left the room, ordered his horse saddled, and had mounted just as young Jack Aberdeen jogged up on his cutting horse, a neat little cow pony with as many fine points as a polo mount.

Without a word, the rancher turned the head of his own horse toward town, and the boy jogged on at his side.

Up and down they dipped over the rugged country. The afternoon wore late. A silver mist began to streak the hollows, and all of those lower places were filled with pools of damp, cold air. On the higher ridges, they climbed to warmer, softer climate. It was a long ten miles, made slower by spots of mud through which the horses had to walk, and many steep slopes and sharp climbs where they walked, also. But during the two hours that the ride endured, not a word was said by the marshal, and not a word was said by his companion except that when the horses were going along gently, he would unsling his guitar, and his fingers wandered constantly over the strings, while he guided his horse by the pressure of his knees and the sway of his body.

This minstrelsy made the lip of the marshal curl, for he was not a man to pay any heed to the softer arts; and music, in particular, was something which never had bubbled up from his heart or, at least, passed his lips. His songs were wordless battle-hymns, forgotten until the moment of action, and dead in his memory as soon as the fight was over.

But all the way to the town, he was filling his mind with a very strange question:

If this slender youngster had managed to meet and beat down the bulk and the practiced skill of Charlie Lake, what would happen in case of an encounter between himself and Jack Aberdeen? Barring miracles, there could be only one termination, he was sure.

And yet Charlie Lake had been in the prize ring, on a day, and such cunning, once learned, is never quite forgotten. The art of blocking and hitting, once fully registered in the mind, never can be quite relegated to forgetfulness. But Charlie Lake, and his science, and his power of hand had gone down as nothing.

What, then, about himself?

He wondered, too, if that question ever would be answered. He roused himself from this dream to find that already they were on the outskirts of the town, with the sun turning red in the west; and, at the same time, he was aware that the boy beside, and a little behind him was singing gaily, and the thrumming of the guitar swept on, regardless of the gait of the horses, which now were jogging again.

He noted this, and turning a little, he regarded the seat of the boy. It was a perfect seat. His body gave to the jolting of the horse, and he was as undisturbed as though they were merely walking. Certainly, Jack Aberdeen had his points. Strange that he never had showed the good ones on the ranch, before this.

A cluster of riders turned a corner behind them and overtook them with a rush. They recognized the big shoulders of the marshal and hailed him first. Then they swept around the boy.

"Hey, it's Happy Jack!"

"Hey, Jack, got anything on for this evening?"

"I'm broke," said Jack cheerfully.

"We ain't," said the others. "You name your brand, kid, and we'll get it for you. Come along down to Morrissey's, will you? We need you, kid, to warm us up!"

"I can't," said Jack.

"Why not?"

"Ask Kinney."

They turned with a sort of jerk of surprise toward the mar-

shal. They were as surprised as he was angered by this sort of abrupt address for the famous man of the law.

"What's up, Mr. Kinney?"

"He goes to jail," said the marshal.

"Hey! Not Happy Jack! He wouldn't do anything rough!"

"What's the charge agin' him?" asked another.

"Nothin' but murder," said Kinney.

"Murder! Him?"

"Charlie Lake."

"You're kiddin' us, Mr. Kenney. The kid, there? Not from behind, anyways? Must've been an accident!"

The marshal was a fair man. "They had a fist fight," said he. "He knocked Lake down. Lake pulled a gun. He shot Lake between the eyes. There you are!"

There was a gasp.

"Lake had it comin' to him," said one. "This is gunna be a joke, not a trial, kid. Say, Happy, don't worry, kid!"

Happy Jack laughed. "I'm not worrying," said he. "It's the marshal, here, that's worrying."

"What about?"

"He's taking me to his little old tin jail, and I've promised him that I'm going to bust loose from it. That's all!"

There was a yell of delight from the others.

"Is that right, Mr. Kinney?"

The marshal turned and glowered at the boy beside him. Happy Jack was still smiling, as though at the prospect of an excellent game. And suddenly he realized that it was a game with this youngster, and that he was pitting himself against the law, its agents, the strong walls of the jail itself, and the force and the wisdom of Marshal William Kinney last and not least of all else.

"You dang young loon!" he angrily growled.

"You can swear pretty good," said the boy, "but talk ain't money. I'll lay my hoss agin' yours, Kinney, that I'm outside of the jail in a week, without the orders of the judge, either."

Kinney was silent, mysteriously enraged by that challenge.

"D'you take it, Mr. Kinney?" asked one of the punchers.

"Sure I do," said the marshal. "There ain't any reason why

a fool shouldn't be parted from his money, and from his hossflesh, too. I'll take that bet, kid. These men are your witnesses that I'll pay my half. Your measley cuttin' hoss—against this!"

CHAPTER VIII

"BLOW, BUGLE, BLOW!"

THE marshal gripped the hard sides of his charger as he spoke, and his heart suddenly sank at the thought of being parted from the mare. She was a dark gray, dappled like a leopard, with four black stockings and a black muzzle. When she was covered with sweat she looked like black velvet all over, and as beautiful as a deer.

She was no monster, but though she was not an inch above sixteen hands and undistinguished by huge quarters or bulging shoulders, she had carried the weight of her master for two long years, and she had carried him so fast and so far that he had done more famous deeds with her beneath him than in all the rest of his career. Once launched on the trail of the fugitive, he could not fail to overtake him, as it seemed, with this gray speedster beneath him. She could endure like the toughest mustang, and she could run like a racer. Only three months before, she had gallantly carried her master while "Texas Joe" Loomis changed mounts three times, and galloped like mad for three days, and galloped in vain to escape from that smoothly gliding Nemesis in the rear. And Texas himself had given adequate testimony to the value of the mare after his capture. It had taken his very heart, he said, to look back every day, and see with his glasses, in the distance, the same gray sweeping along behind him with a never-varying pulse in her stride.

To the marshal she was dearer than all things in the world, except one. He loved her for her strength, he loved her for her dauntless courage, for her truth to him, her unflagging devotion, and perhaps more than all for a sort of savage interest which she seemed to take in the hunt, as though she herself understood perfectly the importance of her work.

Loving her in this manner, it was typical of the man that he

selected as a name for her the most careless appellation that he could think of. He called her Rags! Now, as he made this bet which concerned her destiny, he looked down at her fine head, as has been said, with a sudden sinking of the heart, and wished that he had not been persuaded to speak so soon.

It was far too late, now, however. The cow-punchers had taken up the wager with a shout. The marshal had wagered his favorite Rags against the little pony of "Happy Jack" Aberdeen; it was, moreover, a most sporting wager on the part of the boy, even though the mare was worth ten times his own cutting horse. He had all the odds against him in his task, all the odds to win in succeeding.

So that chattering cavalcade followed on toward the jail.

One or two galloped away before the group. The rumor of what was happening and of what had happened swept like fire through that town, always dry tinder for any news of war. For the West thrived on rumors, and tales, and deeds of battle. It was the salt which gave to life its peculiar savor. The air they breathed would not have been so sweet, had it not been that some, at the least, were in fear of losing breath and life also any moment.

So the town of Debney Wells turned out to greet the procession.

Such it had become before they traversed three blocks. Children appeared by magic, their bare brown legs twinkling, raising puffs of dust. And men and women, too, came out to stare, shading their eyes against the slanting force of the sun, and then hurrying on toward the jail in their turn.

The marshal hated this. He disliked public display, though he sometimes before this had had to submit to it. But, above all, he loathed the importance which this gave to the event of the day. Plainly not he was the center of attention, but Happy Jack Aberdeen.

"It'll give the kid a fat head," said the marshal to himself, "And he's on the way to that, already. Dang all the fools! Dang all the fools!"

When they came to the jail, he became more furious than ever. He heard a sharp click, almost like the click made in the

fall of a trigger upon an empty chamber of a revolver's cylinder. And when he looked hastily to the side, he was aware of a tripod, and a black hooded box upon the top of it, and a man crouched behind the machine.

He had been photographed taking in this prisoner!

If he had obeyed his first impulse, he would have shattered that camera and the head of the photographer with a .45-caliber bullet. He hardly had been so tempted in all his life before. But he restrained himself, and merely gritted his teeth as the photographer stood up, his face flushed, his hair dishevelled, and his eyes alight with triumph.

"I got you that time, Mr. Kinney," he shouted, and waved his hand in greeting and exultation.

A terrible oath rose to the lips of the marshal, and was checked and forced back. For he recognized Sam Phelps, the editor of the Debney Wells *Bugle*.

It did not do to toady to the press. The marshal would have been the last man in the world to do such a thing. But he could not help being aware that Sam Phelps, in his breezy, borrowed style, was constantly filling columns and columns with the deeds of the great marshal. And when Eastern newspapers wrote up the famous man in detail, after one of his exploits, he always could recognize that the majority of their information was based upon articles which had first appeared in the Debney Wells *Bugle*, from the copious writings of the editor.

It was all very well to despise newspapers, but from their columns and their records, serious historians would draw the true narrative, one of these days. And was he not of sufficient importance to merit a biography? A serious biography, brave in brown buckram, lodged upon the shelves of public libraries. He himself, in his callow days of boyhood, had spent many and many an hour, and many a long evening, reading of the deeds of heroes, until a strange thirst, and a bitter, burning hunger, invaded his heart and never would quite be satisfied, no matter what deeds he had wrought in this life of his!

Now, all these emotions and these thoughts drifted suddenly across the mind of the marshal, as he looked at the merry, ugly face of Sam Phelps, that imaginative gatherer of news, and he

found himself instinctively waving at the editor, and saying to him:

"Why, hullo, Phelps, you scoundrel! You got me, this time, it looks like."

There was an old feud between them. He always refused to sit for a portrait, and the result was that Phelps had hunted him with his camera as desperadoes hunted each other with guns. From mysterious concealments, by using all sorts of brilliant devices, Sam Phelps had succeeded in getting more than a score of photographs of the great man. He had them enlarged and framed behind glass, and strung them around the walls of his press room. When one of his cubs complained of a difficult assignment, he used to love to point to those photographs.

"There's a man who wouldn't have his picture taken. I got him twenty times! Now, don't talk any more, but go and get it!"

The marshal sometimes, half grimly and half jovially, threatened to invade that room and tear all the portraits down. But in his secret heart, which was perhaps a little like the heart of a child, in spite of his hardihood and ferocity, he was pleased to know of those twenty representations of himself. For it is one of the mysterious truths about all men, that no matter how ugly we are, we can always endure looking at ourselves!

"I got you this time," said Phelps. "That makes twenty-one. 'Marshal Kinney arriving at jail door with celebrated prisoner.' How would that be for a caption?"

"Celebrated? This?" said the marshal. And he turned and regarded the boy with a grunt of disgust.

"That's what I want to hear about!" said Phelps. "Marshal, will you do me one favor? I beg you to do me one favor."

"Well," said the marshal, "what is it? I suppose I will. I got nothing agin' you, Phelps."

"Well, then, lemme have the story of what happened to Charlie Lake right from the lips of this Jack Aberdeen—and more than that, how he come to make a wager with you—and how Rags was put up for the bet."

"Is that your idea of a story?" said the marshal.

"Story?" said the other. "I tell you what, it's the best story that ever come over my desk since the time that you got the

Cranmer boys and 'Tough' Guinness. Story? This here is a story that'll bust onto every front page in New York. It'll fill up the Sunday supplements, too. Action and human interest. It's what they're always yelling for!"

"Oh, dang your stories!" said the marshal.

It was all very well to spread his name at large. He could not be harmed. But what about this boy? What had the boy done, to appear in such a role?

"I've got your word, marshal!" cried Phelps.

"You've got my word. Well, fire away!"

"Now, Aberdeen, let's have it—right out here before the crowd. Make us a speech! Let's know your whole side of the question. Make it hot, kid, and I'll do you a lot of good!"

"I'll tell you the story," said Happy Jack. And he laughed again, in what seemed to the marshal a foolish fashion. "I owed Lake eighty dollars. He came to get it. I didn't have it. He soaked me; I soaked him; he pulled his gun; I shot him with it. Well, that's all!"

He laughed again. And so did the crowd, and turned and eyed the disappointed Phelps, whose pencil was poised above his shorthand pad.

"Is that all? What about the bet?" yelled some one in the crowd.

And then a thunderbolt fell.

For Happy Jack jerked his thumb at the great marshal, and announced carelessly:

"Kinney has such a fat head that I'm going to help reduce the size of it. I've made the bet with him. My pony, here, against Rags. If you got any money to put down, lay it on me, boys, if you'll take my word for it. This fellow Kinney is going to be ten years out of date, in another week!"

He laughed again in the same manner, but it no longer appealed to the marshal as idiotic laughter, but as the mirth of a mocking fiend. Fury rushed up from his heart to his head, and then rushed back again, and left him cold with a nameless apprehension.

For the crowd was quiet, awed by his presence, but he heard a bubbling sound of suppressed laughter!

CHAPTER IX

CELL OF STEEL

It was not alone the dread lest the boy should escape from him that oppressed the marshal. With bolts and bars and manacles and guards he could make fully sure against that, he thought; but as he sat his horse and listened to the laughing murmur of the crowd, the truth came coldly home to him. He always had told himself that he was a man who despised the mob. It was one of his points of pride that he worked for the law, a salary, and his own self-respect, and that he cared not whether the crowd worshiped or hated him. He used to think that he rather would have preferred hatred to its mawkish, unreasonable, changing affections.

But now he understood himself and his own attitude, for the first time, a veil being plucked away from before his eyes. He had not merely tolerated the articles in the press. He had not really scorned the plaudits of the people.

In fact, they had been the breath of vital life in his nostrils and the savor of existence! He could look back, now, to the hours that he had spent poring over the writings which concerned him. Was it not true that he had severed every clipping? Did he not have three drawers of his desk jammed with them?

Dark blood rose hot in the face of the marshal, and he turned in the saddle and looked steadily upon the boy, as he would have looked upon the evil one, not altogether in fear, or hatred, or disgust, but with a mixture of all these emotions.

Then he dismounted and went briskly about his work, for he felt the need of immediate occupation, lest he should say or do something absurd to reveal his wounded pride and dignity. But he could not help knowing that from this moment he was a changed man, and that he had lost his greatest strength, which was his surety in himself.

Half bitterly, then, he set about his work. He conducted the boy into the jail and found the sheriff in person there. The sheriff received the prisoner with a faint smile. He had heard the case through the window of his office!

"I dunno that this young feller can be held very long," said he.

"The judge has the say about that," said the marshal, "and the judge ain't going to be here for a spell of days, I reckon! Besides, the boy says that he ain't going to wait for the judge. He's going out when he gets good and ready. I suppose that you got room for him in here?"

"I got room for him," said the sheriff, "but I gotta say that it's sort of agin' my principles to hold the lad. I know Charlie Lake. I've always knowed him, and he was an ornery skunk that's been waiting for years for what the kid gave him. Why, man, it was self-defense, anyway, wasn't it?"

The marshal looked earnestly upon the sheriff, and then he said slowly:

"I s'pose that it's gotta be a choice between what you want and what I want. I say that he oughta stay. You say you won't take him in?"

The sheriff wriggled in his chair and grew hot. He was a good man, an honest man, a brave man, and a man loved by the voters of the county, to whom his worth had been many times revealed; but he knew that he could not stand against the marshal. The voters liked him, even loved him; but the marshal was a national figure. They could not have dispensed with William Kinney any more than they could have dispensed with the mountains which ridged their sky.

"I've said my say," said he. "I ain't going to block the way of a brother officer. Only you see how I stand about it!"

"I got no doubt that the kid will remember what you're sayin' and not hold this agin' you," said the marshal, purposely misunderstanding the sheriff. "Now lemme see what kind of irons you got in here."

The sheriff was silenced by this barbed retort, though it brought him to a fighting heat, and his self-control almost gave way. He merely answered: "There's two drawers full of

contrivances. You take your pick. And there's the new-fangled cell, too. You might stick him in there, and mount guard in front of it yourself, if you think that he'll jump out of sight, so soon!"

He got up and left the office, slamming his hat upon his head; it was the mildest retort that he could permit himself at that moment. The marshal looked dourly after his colleague, and then he turned to the boy.

"I'm gunna load you down, kid," said he.

"Go ahead," answered Jack Aberdeen. "You go ahead and load me down, and when I get ready, I'll shake off the stuff!"

The marshal began to pick out the proper instruments. He was in no haste. He wanted to make every step a sure one, for it began to seem to him more important than anything he ever had attempted—the safeguarding of this boy! If seven days elapsed and he were not inside the jail, what would people say? Perhaps he could endure their comments, but he knew, now, that he could not endure their laughter. He, who had looked upon the mob as scum, he was, in fact, the mere slave of their pleasures—in fact, he lived for their applause.

Despising himself, heavy of heart, savagely he worked on.

Finally he found a pair of cuffs that fitted firmly over the wrists of the boy, and still he frowned down at them. He was not so new at his game as not to understand that supple hands can be folded and made smaller than the wrists, and if the boy could do this, then those tightly fitted manacles would be shed. However, Aberdeen had always been a working man, and his hands looked reasonably large, and spread by labor. The marshal felt that he could bank upon the manacles holding.

That was not all. He got the brightest and strongest shackles he could find for the ankles of young Jack Aberdeen, and these he locked in place. Then he linked a strong steel chain to a fifty-pound weight, and ran another chain from the ankles to the hands.

This left Aberdeen a certain amount of liberty, but not much. He could move, but only by making as much noise as a dray rolling over a hollow bridge.

The marshal had barely finished this work when he heard a click, and caught a glimpse at the window of the disappearing head of the editor, with his camera.

The scoundrel had climbed up to the window and there taken a picture which would reveal to the entire world exactly the manner in which the marshal was safeguarding this unlucky prisoner. What comments would be made upon this? He could guess in advance. The killing of Charlie Lake would make the boy far more of a hero than a criminal in ordinary eyes, and these brutal precautions would call down bitterest condemnations upon the head of William Kinney.

His prisoner seemed to understand perfectly, and he was laughing silently when the marshal turned toward him again.

"They got the news, now," said he. "Everybody'll have it, and if I win this hand, Kinney, you might as well quit business and crawl into a hole. I'll certainly make a sick dog out of you, big boy!"

He laughed aloud, and the marshal gritted his teeth, and then cursed himself because he could not help but show his irritation. The more he felt himself in the wrong, the more cordially he detested this youthful prisoner.

Then he led the boy back through the dim aisle of the jail, with the dank smell of cooked food clinging about it, as it always clings to such institutions, so that the floors and the iron bars seem to sweat grease!

In the farthest corner he reached the special cell. He himself had devised it, and he felt that it was above all things in the world a safe receptacle into which to pour the life of the most desperate of men.

Once in that inclosure, the wits of the greatest genius could be expended in vain, unless some one deliberately gave him the keys to the cell! That was not likely, no matter how much sympathy must be aroused for young Jack Aberdeen.

This cell was, after all, a simple contrivance. It consisted merely of a sheet of tool-proof steel—an expensive business!—which coated the walls, the floor, the ceiling of the cell. How could the inmate have air? That was arranged simply, also. There was an outer casement, and the steel, in front of this

casement, was clipped full of holes. They were enough to let in the air, but they could not be enlarged enough to permit an escape in a month of hard sawing.

There was a similar group of holes in the door, so that the air could readily pass across the apartment. The furniture consisted of little more than a cot.

The marshal, having unlocked the big double locks of the door, looked in and nodded with approbation.

The place was damp. It sent out a tepid breath of bad air, which was sufficient proof in itself that the ventilation system had been a little too much on the economic side. Grimly the marshal admitted that there was hardly more than enough air to sustain life in the lungs of a small dog, let alone a man.

However, men had lived here before, suddenly losing strength, turning yellow and sick. Let the boy turn the same color; it would not break the marshal's heart!

He regarded the hard, narrow cot, and nodded again. "There's your happy home," said he.

"Is this here the death cell?" asked the boy.

"Get in," said the marshal.

Young Jack Aberdeen did so, shuffling painfully, with the leaden weight attached to his feet.

And then the marshal noted that his prisoner had taken with him the guitar from the sheriff's desk. He snatched the instrument.

"There ain't any need for you to keep the rest of the boys awake with your jingles," said he.

He regretted his action as soon as it had been performed. He knew that he had given way to a sullen fit of peevishness, and that did not improve his bad temper.

Said young Jack Aberdeen:

"If you're going to use it, just remember that it's pitched a mite high, old song bird!"

The marshal turned his back most abruptly.

"I get no light, eh?" said the boy, as the heavy steel doors crashed shut.

The marshal hesitated.

There were in the law certain prescriptions which concerned

the portions of light and air to be doled out to every prisoner, but now that he had closed the door, he felt shame to open it again. On the morrow, perhaps, he would give the boy a light in his dark chamber.

Now, without making any response, he turned the keys in the lock, and grimly hoped that that sound would put a weight upon the spirit of the lad.

CHAPTER X

KITTY MARVEL

THE office of the sheriff had its window upon the same side of the building in which was the window of the steel cell, and when the marshal returned to the office to fill out the papers for this arrest, he could not help noticing that there was a small crowd gathered in the street, a crowd that gathered momently. It was composed, no doubt of the remnants of those who had followed the marshal and his prisoner to the door of the jail. Now it was being recruited by others, and the cause of that recruiting was a voice that spoke through the jail wall. Thin and small, but very clear, the marshal heard the voice of young Happy Jack Aberdeen. He must have placed his lips close to one of the ventilation holes in the steel sheet.

"Hello, boys!"

"Hello, it's Happy Jack! Hey, Jack, are you happy?"

"I'm happy, boys. I'm takin' a doctor's prescription."

"What's the prescription, Jack?"

"Total rest in a dark room, old sons! No visitors allowed!"

"What you mean by a dark room, Jack?"

"He's got me in his patent cell!"

The marshal flushed and found himself waiting with tense, taut nerves.

There was a loud murmuring in the street.

"He's got Jack in the cell! By gosh, that ain't fair!"

"He ain't looking for fairness, he's looking for headlines in the papers," said Jack.

The marshal jerked up his head with a soft oath. And he cursed again, more loudly, when he heard a roar of laughter from the street.

He ventured to look out the window, and the first form that he saw was that of the tall editor of the *Bugle*, and the flash

of white in his hand revealed that he was taking down this conversation in his accursed shorthand. No doubt that this would be what he was fond of referring to as "human interest."

"He's gotta make so many arrests," said Jack. "Otherwise, the papers would forget him."

"Jack," bawled a loud voice, "you're getting a dirty deal. We're gunna let the governor know about this!"

"Don't you do it," said Happy Jack. "This here will be the making of me."

"What you mean by that?"

"Up to now, I've only been Happy Jack. After today, I've gotta be turned into 'Jack the Desperado,' if newsprint can do it."

The crowd laughed again, and another sang out: "How's that?"

"What's the reputation in arresting a peaceful gent like me? I gotta be fixed up with a brand-new reputation. The marshal will 'tend to that, all right! If I ain't worth a thousand to him, I ain't worth a penny. I'm gunna be turned into 'Desperate Jack' Aberdeen, one of the most dog-gone fatal men in the world when it comes to shootin' a song on a guitar!"

There was more laughter, and then ugly murmurs again.

The marshal began to doubt. Suddenly he wished with all his heart that he had this affair to handle over again from the beginning. He would have changed his ideas entirely. He would have congratulated Jack for his courage and skill, increased his pay, praised him before all the men, made him into a valued friend and assistant. That seemed the popular and logical way now. Instead, he had acted like a tyrant. But what hurt most of all was that if this day had revealed his weakness to himself, it also revealed that the rest of the world was aware of the same failings in the man of the law.

"Give us a song now, Jack!" called some one.

"There's hardly air enough here to breath with, let alone to sing with, boys. I'm sorry."

"It's a danged outrage!" said some one close under the marshal's window.

And again the marshal burst into a fever of uneasiness. He

would have given a year of his life to undo his hasty, ill-considered actions of this day. Most of all, because he knew that he was not the sort of man that these deeds seemed to point to. He was a little overbearing, perhaps, but he was not a cruel bully, and his point of honor had been in giving the worst of criminals a fair shooting chance against him. But he had taken a wrong first step, and as he waited there, listening, his brain in a whirl, he did not see how he could retract. Not, certainly, to gratify a public clamor!

"Give us a tune on the guitar, then, Jack?" demanded another of this public entertainer.

The marshal set his teeth and waited for the answer, which came clearly:

"Kinney took that, too. He was plumb set on me havin' a good rest, boys!"

At this, there was an actual uproar from the people in the street, and loud denunciations.

The blood rushed into the marshal's head, but now he left the office, closed and locked the door of the jail, because the guard was on duty outside, with his own key, and he walked off up the street. Gladly he would have avoided that throng, but he knew the house to which he wished to go, and that house lay directly up the street. He would not compromise with himself, but went gravely stalking through the midst of the idlers.

They became silent as he passed. Then a boy piped, behind his back:

"Hey, Jack! Here comes your friend Bill Kinney, right now!"

"Why, hullo, old man!" said the voice of Happy Jack, wonderfully clear through the ventilation holes. "How's old Bill this evening? Goin' down to the newspaper office, Bill? Give the editor my regards, will you? Tell him I hope that the snapshots turn out pretty well, because I tell you what, it's a good thing for the young, growin' boys of the country to have sight of the face of a real hero. A real, old-fashioned hero like you, Bill! Well, so long, Bill. Give my regards to Kitty, too. Tell her I'll drop around and call as soon as I'm tired of restin' here!"

The marshal, in spite of himself, had quickened his pace as he passed through the fire of stinging raillery, and as he retreated,

his face set like iron, he heard a snickering behind him, like the subdued mirth of a schoolroom. Then the crowd gathered courage, because of its numbers, perhaps, or because of the dusk which half obscured it. It broke into a loud roar of appreciative, mocking, deriding, and scornful laughter!

He could hardly believe his ears. And, instinctively, he whirled about and faced toward them.

"Look out!" yelled a warning voice. "He's reachin' for his gat!"

The crowd swayed, grunted with appreciation; and the marshal turned and went rapidly on his way. He realized, now, that it was the worst thing he possibly could have done. It showed to the crowd two things—that he wanted to bully it into silence, and that the jests of his prisoner actually had got under his skin. The victory was with Happy Jack Aberdeen, he knew, in spite of the fact that the boy was now lodged in the jail in the darkest and the strongest cell!

Breathing hard, he hurried along the street until he came at a little distance to a neat lawn, with a sprinkler humming and whispering above it; and a delicate scent of roses stole out to the nostrils of the marshal.

It was the house of Joe Marvel. To the marshal, it was differentiated from all the other little sun-faded houses on the street, because it held something more precious to him than the bright blue of heaven. Kate Marvel was to be his wife!

He waited a moment, with his hand on the top of the gate. He waited for the fury and the grief and the pain to pass from his heart, and for the hard lines to be smoothed from his face. He even rubbed his forehead with his hand to banish them, for sometimes he had seen Kate look at him with fear. Then fresh anger rose in him. For he remembered at that moment what the boy in the jail had said. He had called aloud in the presence of the crowd that he would drop in to see "Kitty."

That was one reason they had laughed!

Did this boy, this prisoner, know everything? Was his cheerful voice now issuing from the jail wall, telling the amused crowd that the marshal had bought this girl as he would buy a

prize cow? Perhaps he was! Big William Kinney's brows gathered again.

And then, from far down the street, he heard a gay voice lifted, singing. He recognized that voice. All of the town of Debney Wells would recognize it, too, as far as it could reach! It was Happy Jack Aberdeen singing like a bird from his prison.

The marshal opened the gate with a jerk and stepped hurriedly onto the gravel path.

"Why, hullo, Mr. Kinney!" said the voice of Marvel.

And the cripple came toward him up the path, swinging his bulk along dexterously on his crutches. He held out his hand. And the marshal took it, and felt the hard callus which the rung in the crutch had worn there—a hard hollow. Even in the dusk, too, he could see the deprecation in the face of this man who was his dependent.

"This is a surprise," said Marvel. "We didn't know that we were going to have the luck of seeing you this evening, Mr. Kinney. Come right in, sir. Hello, Kate!"

Her voice answered. And at the sound of it, the marshal forgot the crushed, over-anxious courtesy in the manner of Marvel. He forgot everything, and faced toward the porch.

She ran out through the doorway. She was in an apron, fresh from the kitchen; her sleeves rolled up, and the lamplight glimmered faintly upon her bare arms.

One day, those hands would work for William Kinney, in his own kitchen. Aye, or they could rest idle and grow white on softest velvet, if she chose. She was a jewel, and he would inclose her as in a jewel casket, as one treasure beyond price.

So he said to himself, breathing deeply.

"Did you want me, dad?" asked Kitty.

"I wanted you to—"

"Listen!" she broke in.

And her head canted gracefully to one side, and she raised a hand for silence.

"Why—it's Happy Jack! He's come back to town!" she cried out.

The eyes of the marshal widened. He never had heard that

note in her voice when she greeted him. They had heard nothing, then, in this house. The marshal walked hastily forward and up the steps.

"Hello, William!" she said to him.

There was no ring of joy, now! There was no pleasant surprise, but a smile summoned by an act of will, and real fear, real uncertainty.

"You know Jack Aberdeen?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes. Every one knows Jack!" And she smiled up at him cheerfully. "He's so jolly!" said the girl. "There's never a good dance, unless Jack comes to it!"

"He won't be coming for a while," said the marshal.

She looked at him, puzzled.

"He's in jail," said he, and studied her with a grim closeness.

"Jail!" said she. Then she caught her breath. "Oh, he's been drinking again—poor Jack! They won't let him alone with their liquor!"

She knew all about Jack, it appeared, and his ways, and the ways of others with him. Jealousy sprang up in the soul of the marshal.

"He's murdered a man," said Kinney, "and that's why he's in jail!"

She laid a hand against her cheek, and her lips mutely repeated the words, and her great eyes stared at him. And all the pain which had hurt the marshal on this day was nothing compared with the anguish which stabbed and burned him now!

How well did she know Happy Jack Aberdeen?

Oh, well would he have traded for that bit of information all that Happy Jack knew about him, all that Jack was telling to the crowd!

CHAPTER XI

TRIALS OF A MARSHAL

THE cripple had swung himself up onto the porch and stood beside them. He broke in hastily: "Why, Kate, you act like it was your own brother in jail! What if Aberdeen is in jail? What's it to you?"

She looked anxiously at her father, and then visibly collected herself.

"Why—nothing—except that I've always—I mean, it doesn't seem that Jack is the sort of man to— He's murdered a man!" She swallowed. "Will—will they hang him? Will they hang him, William?"

The marshal hung above her, dwelling in exquisite pain upon her stammerings, her white face, her staring eyes.

Happy Jack—ah, if he wanted this girl, he would not have had to buy her by long subsidizing of her helpless father, by money to her brother, by endless chains of little gifts to herself, by long and constant courtship. Happy Jack! For a song, perhaps, she would have given her hand to him. Songs had their value, it seemed, to crowds, and to women!

Then he answered after that bitter pause: "They won't hang him—probably. He did it—more or less in self-defense, I suppose!"

Instantly the color flashed back into her face, the light into her eyes. She made a little gesture toward the marshal with both hands, more impulsive, more joyous than ever she had made toward him before, as though she would thank him for the good tidings which he had brought to her!

"I'm glad!" she said. "I'm mighty glad!"

"You'd better get back into the kitchen and hurry supper along," said her father. "Mr. Kinney is a hungry man, most al-

ways! Hurry along, Kate! You might stir up some corn fritters. He likes 'em pretty well, eh, Mr. Kinney?"

The marshal said nothing but stepped back out of the light that flowed dimly through the doorway, for at that moment he did not care to have his face clearly seen. He watched her go, hurrying, and as she went through the door, and as her heels tapped lightly down the hall toward the kitchen, he wondered how she appeared at a dance?

He never had seen her when she was surrounded by young boys, young girls, but he could imagine her face when she was rosy with dancing, and when her eyes were brightened by laughter. And he told himself that he was a fool to have given her so much rope. He should have watched her more closely. He should even have made himself young for her sake and gone to those same dances— To be contrasted in his heavy ways, his unlaughing voice, his grim face, with the good looks and the gaiety of Happy Jack Aberdeen? No, it was best, after all, that he should have been left in ignorance until the last.

The cripple was saying something to him, he hardly heard the voice. They sat on the veranda, and watched the pale gleam of the spray that the sprinkler flung out in ghostly circle upon circle. The ground drank it with an audible murmur. He, too, was thirsty, and his thirst was for the peace and the eternal joy which would be his when the girl entered his house. The carpenters began on the new wing the next week!

Then he picked up the voice of Joe Marvel, saying: "Looks like they've got a sort of powwow on down there in front of the jail. Looks pretty much like a lynching party was starting, eh? There ain't anybody in the jail that I don't know about, is there?"

"No. Nobody much. A couple of tramps. They won't lynch anybody," added the marshal. "It's a habit that they've pretty nigh forgot."

"Since you come to town!" said Marvel, in too obvious admiration. "No, they ain't apt to start any necktie parties so long as they know that you're around. You've done a lot for this town, Mr. Kinney. You've done pretty nigh as much for the whole

town as you've done for me. And though it don't talk so much, the people around here know what you've done, and they're grateful!"

The marshal blinked uncomfortably. It was always this way. It was the double price which he paid, that having aided this helpless fellow, he should have to endure the painful gratitude, so frequently expressed! He wanted to shout and curse at the man, sometimes.

But he knew that it was hardly the fault of Marvel.

He had lost a leg in a mine explosion shortly after his marriage, but he had not surrendered. By dint of powerful arms and mighty shoulders, he had kept his place, and sunk his drills through as much rock as any man, hopping clumsily on his one strong leg, and learning all sorts of odd devices for propping himself erect. He had been the admiration of the mining camps!

Then his young wife died. He had his work to do all day, and at night he had to care for two children. But he had done that, too, with the wonderful cheer of a strong and a willing man.

The second accident was what had broken his spirit. His left hand had been shattered beyond hope of ever wielding a double jack again, or of holding a drill. Chance had brought the marshal into his hut while he lay on the bed groaning, not with pain but with despair, and there the marshal had seen a fourteen-year-old girl at the bedside of her father.

The little house was dark, but it seemed to the marshal that the girl was illuminated by the light of her own spirit, and what he saw at that moment was not that single instant, but the woman she would grow to be, and all his own future.

He was a man of foresight, was Marshal Kinney, as he had proved in the ordering of his affairs upon his own ranch, and now he bent the same foresight upon the child and told himself that he must have her, and that he would.

So he had taken up the affairs of Marvel and ordered them, also, and kept pouring in a stream of money which was life to the family. There was a sixteen-year-old boy, and there was the helpless father—and there was the girl—

"How old is Kate?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, you remember, Marshal Kinney! She was just eighteen, four months back."

"Eighteen? Eighteen?"

The marshal fell into a dream. It was very young, but for that matter, every year that took her closer to twenty, took him closer to forty.

"Eighteen?" repeated the marshal. "Well, you know, eighteen ain't a baby, Marvel."

"No, sir, eighteen is sort of getting on. Eighteen—well, it don't seem like so many years have slipped away since I—"

"Marvel!"

"Yes, sir?" asked the anxious father.

"One of these days we're to marry, I take it?"

"Why, yes. One of these days, I should say so."

"You ain't regretting it, Marvel?"

"Regretting? Why, Mr. Kinney, that's an idea for you? Regretting? I reckon that's gratitude in us Marvels. There's a scrap of it, I reckon, at least!"

"Well," said the marshal, getting away from the disagreeable subject of gratitude as quickly as he could, "the fact is that I don't see any good reason why we should wait forever. Why should we? She's wearin' her life away here doin' housework," he went on, when he saw that the father had no ready answer. "Why shouldn't she marry me—and have an easy life?"

He was glad of the darkness. He was glad that he could not see the face of the father, or have read it.

A hoarse voice answered: "Eighteen ain't so very old, Mr. Kinney. Of course, in a couple of years—"

"A couple of years be danged!" said Kinney.

For suddenly it was wonderfully clear to him that the thought of the marriage was even more horrible to the father than it could have been to the child. As for her, she went with a sort of sweet resignation to her fate. Well, the marshal could stand that. Love matches, after all, were rot. He'd often heard experienced men say so. Better to go ahead with cold blood, pick out a suitable girl—and then in the course of time she would be taught by riper experience to love her mate.

So reasoned the marshal, and he drew a long breath.

"If—if you got your heart fixed on it," said the father, "I suppose that Kate—wouldn't be objecting—"

His voice died away. The marshal could see even in the shadows that the father had slipped back in his chair, like one who had received the shock of a great blow.

And misery filled the soul of the marshal, and compassion entered his heart. But at that moment, he heard again a sound of singing from down the street. It was Happy Jack, tuneful as a bird on a bough, and the heart of the marshal turned to iron again, and his will reverted to its original purpose.

"A couple of weeks to get the wedding ready. That oughta be enough," said he.

"Yes, Mr. Kinney," said the faint voice of the father.

CHAPTER XII

AND MORE TRIALS STILL

They were seated at the table without the company of Dick Marvel, the younger brother. He came in late and, when he saw the marshal, halted in the doorway and stared darkly at him.

He had a great part of his sister's good looks, a dark, rather sullen expression marring his face; and it was darker than ever upon this evening.

"Dick, where's your manners?" demanded his father sharply. "What you mean by standin' there like a lout, when you see the marshal has done us the honor of stayin' for dinner?"

"Hello," said Dick grumpily to the marshal.

The eye of the latter sparkled. He would have liked to have turned that lad over his knee and to have flogged him soundly, but he restrained himself with difficulty, and gave the boy a pleasant word and a nod, while Dick slumped into a chair.

His sister looked upon him with a sharp eye.

"Have you washed your hands, Dick?"

"Sure I have."

"Let me see!"

Dick jerked up his head. "I'm not gonna," said he. "I ain't a baby, I guess."

"Dick!" commanded the father sternly. "What you mean by makin' a scene like this? Where's your manners? Right in front of the marshal, too."

Dick departed, and returned in a moment with the palms of his hands of a paler shade.

"Where you been so late?" his father asked him. "You got nothin' to do but to turn up at meals on time, and even that's too much for you!"

"I been down to the jail," said Dick.

He did not turn his head, but his eyes flashed a gleam of

light at the marshal, and William Kinney set his teeth, not for the first time, that day. He never had seen this boy when the youngster had not shown a definite and proper awe for the man of the law, but the awe seemed to have departed forever. He did not need to ask what agency had spirited it away, for well he knew that it was the act of that imp, Happy Jack Aberdeen.

"You been down to the jail!" exclaimed the indignant father. "Mind you don't land in it, one of these days! You been down to the jail, what for?"

"Why, what's pretty nigh everybody in town down there for?" asked the boy carelessly. He glanced again at the marshal.

"Well, why?" said the father.

"Because of Happy Jack. It's sure a scream to hear the way that he's carrying on."

William Kinney's nostrils flared.

"He's a bright boy, that Happy Jack," said he. And he added with unnecessary venom: "And he's gonna be in a mighty heap of trouble, one of these days!"

"He sure knows a lot about you, Mr. Kinney," said Dick. And he broke into loud laughter.

"Dick," commanded his father, "shut your mouth! Are you laughin' at the marshal, I'd like to know—at my table, that he's—"

"Leave it be," broke in the marshal. His own curiosity tortured him until he asked a direct question.

"What's he carrying on about?"

"Why, about you," said the boy, and looked straight in the eyes of Kinney, with amusement, and derision, and with some contempt. The marshal had to look suddenly down at the table. He was more moved by that glance than ever by leveled guns. If the very children began to feel this way, how were their elders apt to react?

Kitty listened in perfectly open excitement; and even her father, keeping a studious frown upon his forehead, could not disguise the fact that he was interested. His eyes blazed with it.

"He was tellin' how you come to take up ranchin'," said the boy.

"How was that?" asked the marshal, making himself patient.

"Why, he told about how you got educated to be a nerve doctor—"

"A what?"

"A doctor for the nerves, and how you took care of an old woman that had the D. T.'s, and how she died and left her money to you, and you—"

"What?" shouted the marshal.

The boy roared with laughter. "It sure was a scream," said he, "to hear the way that the old woman used to carry on and that you used to try to soothe her. Happy says you done five million dollars' worth of work for fifty thousand dollars' worth of cash and you—"

"He lies!" said the marshal. "That old aunt of mine who died and left the money to me—"

"Why, then there is somethin' in it?" demanded the boy, his eyes bulging.

The marshal saw that he had far overstepped the proper limits of discretion, and he looked glumly down at his plate. He knew that the eyes of the others were filled with mirth, and were exchanging messages. And this was the night he had chosen to broach the marriage at an early date!

For the thousandth time that day he cursed Happy Jack Aberdeen, and cursed him with all his heart.

"Listen!" said Dick Marvel. "He's singin' again. Listen—maybe you can hear the words! You ought to 've heard him sing about how Marshal Kinney made—"

He choked with laughter.

"Well?" said the grim marshal.

"How you made the speech to the newspaper men in Denver, that time!"

"There wasn't any time," said the marshal. "I never made a speech to newspaper men in my life."

"Anyway, it was a scream," said Dick. "I laughed till I nearly died! I tell you what, there's some that've laughed so much, they scarcely can stand! It was like pullin' teeth for me to come away—I tell you what—"

"You've talked about enough, Dick," said the girl, with an air of severity which, the marshal thought, hardly masked the twinkling of her eye.

"I wasn't sayin' nothing, but what he said. And I'll tell you what," said the irrepressible Dick, "there's gunna be something happen! That's what!" He looked defiantly at the marshal.

"Is there?" said the marshal. "About what?"

"About him! About him bein' put in jail—for nothin'! I tell you what—"

"Dick, you shut up!" said the father.

Dick obeyed, and in the moment of awkward silence, out of the distance the voice of the singer floated toward them, thin and clear, with the rhythm of a popular air.

"Jiminy," said Dick, "if only you could hear the words, though!"

And he laughed at the thought. Then, with a few masterful sweeps, he cleared his plate and pushed back his chair in such haste that the feet screeched upon the floor.

"I'm gone!" said Dick.

"Dick, ain't you got no manners?" persisted the excited father. "You stay here and let the marshal—"

"Aw, let him go," said William Kinney, heartily glad to be rid of the youthful pest.

At the door, the boy whirled: "What'll you think, marshal, if they bust into that little old jail of yours and take him out? They're sayin' now, what right have you got to put him there for the killing of a pig like Charlie Lake? That's what they're saying! So long!"

He dashed away. The front door crashed, heels thumped only twice on the front steps, and then the front gate creaked far away.

The marshal had pushed back his chair in turn. But Mr. Marvel soothed him, in haste.

"There ain't a chance of that," said he. "There ain't a single chance. They know you. The people in this town know you, Mr. Kinney. They wouldn't be such fools as to waste any time on a young good-for-nothin' guitar player like—"

"It's not fair to call him a good-for-nothing," said the girl, coloring. "He's never down anything really wrong—until to-day —and that was self-defense. You said so yourself—William!"

He noted that his name always came unwillingly upon her lips, or haltingly, at least.

"I said so," he admitted.

He inclined his head thoughtfully, listening, for far away he could hear a sound other than the light voice of the singer. It was the hum and then the roar of the crowd, as many voices were raised together. It sounded like strife, people falling upon one another in a hot battle.

"They might talk a mite, and get up some steam," said Mr. Marvel, hearing the same sound, "but they wouldn't dare to—"

And at that instant they heard a deep, distinct roar of an explosion, followed by a peal of exultant shouts.

The marshal pushed back his chair.

"By hickory!" cried he. "They've blown the door of the jail and—"

He turned and fairly ran from the room, but as he passed through the door, he had a sight of the girl rushing for the window, and hanging out it eagerly, as though she, too, wished that she could be there to help in the deliverance of the prisoner! This, he told himself, was occasion for guns, occasion for death. A jail delivery under his very nose, of his own specially caught prisoner!

He sped up the street as fast as his legs could cover the ground, bending well forward, a gun in his right hand, and oaths boiling in his throat. He wanted one thing, and that was the sight of Happy Jack at close range, and a chance to smash a .45-caliber slug into his handsome face.

But as he came nearer, he saw that there were many people about the jail, to be sure; but they were all moving out from the building at their best speed, as though they expected that it would explode the next instant.

They had feared his coming, then, and they had fled in time!

He laughed through his set teeth, and bounding up the steps of the jail, he passed through the doors, one of which hung on broken hinges. A great black powder-mark was on the stones of the porch, and just inside the doors he found the guard lying, his pockets turned out. A lantern burned dimly on the wall. He raised it above his head, and looking into the far corner of the room, he saw that the heavy doors of the special dark cell were standing widely ajar also!

CHAPTER XIII

FREEDOM!

The heart of young Jack Aberdeen had fallen very low indeed, when he found himself confined in the dark cell of the jail, but he did not give himself time to surrender to the depression. His first glance around the gloomy cell—only a single moment during which the light from the lantern which the marshal carried fell within the place—had been enough to show him that escape could not be made from this cell through any cleverness of his own. He might slip all his irons, but the tool-proof steel of the cell walls would still retain him. He remembered having read of the details of the structure of that cell in one issue of the *Bugle* of Debney Wells, and at the time he had agreed with his companions in the bunk house that escape from such a place was impossible.

Now Jack felt that he was gripped in the invincible hand of the law and that all hope of freedom was totally lost. It meant that his life was in no danger; certainly, as soon as the judge appeared in Debney Wells, he would discharge this case with the utmost expedition, but when he was freed, his best cutting horse would be the possession of the marshal, and he himself would have become a town jest for the madness of his wager.

He would not allow his mind to dwell upon that unlucky circumstance, but he kept himself up by a constant attention to the noises which he could hear through the air holes which faced upon the street. Through them, also, there came the dimmest ghosts of light from the lamps in the windows on the other side of the way.

Those faintest glimmerings of light were all that he had to connect himself with the world, and that was his last possibility of power, for with that murmur of voices and that touch of illumination he would have to find the strength to cut his way through the steel walls that inclosed him.

How he could do this, he did not imagine. His first thought was merely to get in touch with some of those random voices, to hold the passersby—and afterward he would be able, by miracle, to come at some course of action.

That was why, almost immediately after he was in the cell, he began that continuous running fire of comment and chatter with the men in the street; and they listened, they paused, they answered, they laughed and joked with him, and their numbers constantly increased, until he found that this was not simply a careless, useless audience which had collected to be amused. It was more; it was a tool which, by manipulation, he might be able to use for his good!

The moment that thought entered his mind, his heart was at ease. For it had seemed to the boy, at the moment when he defied the great marshal, that there was a sort of supernatural promise to him that all should be well, and now he was more than reasonably sure that the promise would be redeemed.

So he waited until he heard the passage of the marshal through the crowd, and flung after him a few barbed remarks. After that, he knew that he would be left alone, for a time at least, and freed from the surveillance of the wise marshal. And he carried on his running fire of comment, and song, and chatter.

He had a little gift of improvisation which had often in the past enabled him to work a few impromptu verses into the most casual of airs, and these verses usually were a tremendous sensation with the audience.

He used this power and every other in his possession to build up a picture of the marshal that would anger the people in the street. He lacked his guitar, but even that lack helped him; that crowd knew his singing and his playing; they knew to whom the loss of the guitar could be attributed! In the meantime, he had his voice with which to strike the marshal, and he began to wonder if an unaided voice might not prove stronger than two striking, powerful hands?

He always had had the power of observation of a caricaturist. That sense he had used merely to make the mildest fun of his mates. But now he turned to its more savage side and gave the

crowd his picture of the marshal. He had seen that eminent man exactly as that day had revealed the marshal to himself!

And now he drew the picture with all its contradictions—the marshal's love of newspaper notoriety, together with his pretended horror of notice—his avid collecting of every item that concerned himself—his love of the man trail, too, because of the blood that was at the end of it—his brutal battles in the name of the law, but really to gratify his own hunger for excitement and for conflict. He saved for the last the most important item, and that was a vivid account of his battle with Charlie Lake, and how Charlie had battered him to the ground and grappled with him, and how he in turn, finding strength, had managed to get clear, and had shot down the enemy.

It was this tale which finally brought a roar of rage from the crowd. And all in a moment, as it were, the thing was done. He heard the crash of an explosion, and the rending open of the front door. He heard the bellow of the crowd boom through the interior of the jail, and he heard the frantic protests of the guard, a small rock against the rise of such a tide!

They poured in; they came with the guard's own keys; they rushed and stormed through the jail and came to his own doors. He encouraged them cheerfully through the holes in the door. And he heard key after key being tried. He was afraid at this latest moment they would fail.

They were his weapon—this mob; they were his knife to cut his way through the stout wall of the jail, as he had promised the marshal that he would do!

The picture of the gray mare formed in his mind; he laughed aloud; and his laughter made the man with the keys snarl: "Don't be so gay, kid, because the marshal is gunna raise all kinds of heck for this. Hey, some of you men keep a watch, will you? He's apt to be here any minute, and his guns'll be talkin'!"

And the boy in the cell, listening, knew that the marshal was like a cat to all these mice, and they would scatter like a whirl of scampering little rodents, if he should appear. If only they would remain long enough to gnaw through that sheet of steel—

There was a sudden alarm—feet clattered away.

Then one man came back. There was shouting about the doors of the jail. Was the marshal already there?

But he heard one man with the keys, groaning with fear, but sticking to his task! And suddenly the lock was turned, and the man came in. By feeble lantern light he worked at the leg shackles—already the boy had slipped his hands from the steel cuffs. And now he waited, savagely patient, and wondering at the bowed back of his deliverer.

It was old "Buddie" Clark. He was nearly sixty, if he was a day, and his employment was merely in odd jobs, here and there, splitting kindling, or chopping wood, or working a bit in the gardens of the housewives of the town, and picking up a dollar here and there for food. He lived like the idle loafer that he was, and in contempt, the town kept him saddled with the nickname of his youth. They still called him "Buddie" Clark!

This was the man who stuck to his post when the rest of the crowd had scattered like mice. His hands shook; the boy snatched the keys from him, found the right one by instinct, and in another instant he was free.

"Help me out of this," said old Buddie. "I—I couldn't hardly walk, I guess!"

He took Clark under the armpits and helped him through the cell room.

"I'll watch out for you," said the boy. "Don't you worry. If it comes to guns, we'll match the marshal. There you are. There's the door!"

He saw Buddie Clark run tottering down the steps, losing some of his hysteria when he saw freedom immediately before him. For his part, he turned into the sheriff's office.

He wanted several things which were left behind there when the marshal had stripped him, and he reclaimed his guitar, his wallet, his hat, his pocket knife, a few other odds and ends from his plundered pockets, and the revolver which he had taken from Charlie Lake. As he gripped it, the roughness of the three notches rubbed sharply against the inside of his fingers, and he smiled.

That instant he heard a heavier step on the front steps of the

jail, and the voice of the marshal himself cursing, and then the panting of the big man.

The boy went through the office window like a cat, and dropped to the street.

The famous gray mare stood just before him, and he unknotted the tie rope slowly. He told himself that the marshal would come back immediately from the door of the jail. There would be guns then, and he felt that he would welcome the fight. This was distinctly his day!

But no. The heavy footfall hurried back through the cell room—to make sure that the prisoner actually had escaped from the wide doors of his cell! So the boy swung into the saddle on the gray mare, and the instant that he was up on her he knew, by something in the swell of her ribs and the length of her rein, that he never before had been upon such an animal. He knew that she was better even than the stories they told of her! He swung into the saddle, and gave the mare her head, and she swung and jogged straight down the street, without waiting for compulsion from the reins.

Why should she go in that direction?

Jack looked around. The marshal had not yet appeared in the door of the jail; the street was cleared of its crowd that had worked the delivery so speedily; but every door framed figures, and men, and women, and children leaned from every window.

They did not call out to him, but he knew that they rejoiced in his escape, that they were with him and against their great marshal, and again, at that, he laughed to himself. The mare was his, rightly won in the forfeit of a gambling debt; his freedom was rightly his, moreover, the gift of the townsfolk; and all this was snatched from Marshal William Kinney in a single day, and by his single hands!

The mare turned toward the mouth of a little alley, and then he saw that it was the house of the cripple, Joe Marvel, and that the alley was that which ran past the house to the small barn of the marshal's pensioner.

He remembered, at that moment, that he had promised to call on Kitty Marvel, beautiful Kate Marvel, who made the

heads of all men, young and old, turn after her when she passed, who made even happily married men sigh a little after she was gone.

And the boy laughed to himself, possessed by this new spirit which had entered him that same morning, when his hand closed on the wrist of Charlie Lake, and the man had been powerless in his grasp.

CHAPTER XIV

TO A NEW LIFE!

Behind the barn Jack left Rags; then he came back to the house and saw that old Marvel sat on the front porch in the darkness, smoking a pipe; and there was a light in the kitchen. He looked through the kitchen window, and he saw there Kate Marvel bending over the dishpan in the sink. Something sounded far off toward the jail, and instantly she was running to the window, her hands bright with water. There she paused, listening, her breathing just above him, her hands on the sill hardly an inch from his face.

Presently she went back to her work, and he heard her sigh.

He watched her with a young man's critical eye, and even so he could find no fault, but thought of her as perfect. She had seemed to him very pretty long before this, when he saw her at the country dances; but now she was something more than pretty—she was exquisite, she was flavored with delicate romance—and was this added glamour all because the marshal claimed her?

Young Jack Aberdeen bowed his head again, and he listened to the spirit of mischief that was in him, and the spirit pointed out with a shadowy finger that Kitty had smiled upon Jack at the dances; she had laughed with Jack at the dances; she even had blushed when her eyes first rested upon his face.

"Ah-ha!" said Jack Aberdeen silently, and silently, too, he laughed in the dark.

It was not, you must understand, that he felt actual malice, but that Jack Aberdeen looked upon her as a portion of the possessions of big Marshal William Kinney, and, therefore, he had very little more scruple than some hardy English buccaneer would have felt when he found himself upon the Spanish Main, and the lights of some Spanish town beginning to blink innocently, helplessly, through the foliage of the forest.

Jack Aberdeen went to the kitchen door, and leaning beside it, he touched the strings of his guitar in the way which he knew best of all; and he muted his voice, an art which he understood perfectly, also; and he fixed his thoughts upon the figure at the sink, where he heard the dishes rattling in the water and clinking as they were laid out to drain upon the inclined board. Thought, it seems, will carry sound wherever it will lead it, no matter how soft the music may be, and presently he knew that his singing had penetrated and had reached her mind, at last.

For the clattering of the dishes ended; and he could feel the silence that had fallen upon the kitchen as she stood more than half frightened, delighted, too, wondering if that soft music which she heard was only a product of her mind and her memory.

The spirit in Jack Aberdeen laughed aloud, and Jack sang on. He heard a stealthy footfall approach the door, pause there—and still he sang, a very sad song, of a poor fellow who loved a girl with all his heart, and who had been away on a great journey, and had come back to find her in the home of another man!

It was a sort of "Enoch Arden" song, and the boy breathed his young heart into it. His lips were smiling, his eyes danced, but all the tremor of a broken soul was in the pathos of the voice with which he sang.

The door was plucked suddenly open, and he saw the girl before him, with her face pale, and her eyes wide, as though she expected to see a ghost standing there in the night.

For all of that, he did not falter in his song, but he banished the smile from his lips, and the glitter which he could not banish from his eyes, he veiled, by looking down to his guitar like some poor blind beggar listening to his own unhappy strains of music, and not knowing if another heard.

He sang that sad song on and on, and he did not need to look in her face, for the spirit in young Jack Aberdeen was looking at her, instead, and was perfectly aware of the color that was rushing up into her face, of the fluttering of her heart, of the quickness with which she breathed!

Suddenly he dropped the guitar to arm's length and slowly

raised to her eyes which he clouded with all the imitated sorrow which he could muster. And he saw that her lips were trembling, and that her eyes had filled with tears.

She caught her breath audibly, and roused out of her tender, sad dream.

"You'd better go quick, Jack," said she. "It's mighty dangerous here. The marshal may be coming back—"

"What do I care?" said Jack the liar. "Oh, what do I care, Kate? My life's a ruined life. I'm a man that's done for. And what do I care, Kate, if the marshal comes back for me? Perhaps I'd better be back in the jail, because now I'm an outlawed man! And before I go away, I had to come here. I didn't know you'd hear me. I was singing to myself, Kate!"

Tears formed in the eyes of poor Kate Marvel. Tears grimed those eyes, and then rolled down her cheeks.

And the spirit in Jack Aberdeen laughed with victory.

He stepped a little closer. She shrank, as though she would move away; but she did not move, and he stood before her, close, close to her, so close that he came within that sphere of magic which violently repels man and woman, or more violently draws them together. His own heart quickened its beat, and wine leaped through his blood and mounted into his brain.

He looked down at her, and he saw that she was swaying a little. It was not the spirit in him; it was Jack himself who put his arms about her gently. And she, as gently, tried to push him away, her hands upon his arms—and utterly failed in her effort.

"Will you look at me, Kate?" said he. "Because I can't talk. I've got no right to tell you that I love you, or how much I love you; you belong to another man. Another man has bought you, and I have no right! But look at me, Kate, and maybe you can guess what I can't say!"

She did look up to him, though he guessed that her dim eyes could hardly see as far as his face, hardly make out the uncanny brilliance of his eyes.

"Oh, heaven forgive me!" said Kate Marvel. "And—I wish that you'd go, Jack!"

"I want to go," said the liar. "I want to drag myself away

from you, but I don't seem to have power to move. Because all my mind and my heart is pulled up close to you, d'you see, Kate? And I've no power to take myself away!"

She was close to him, now, and he could feel her trembling, and the spirit of mischief and of youth danced within him for sheer joy.

"I'm sort of weak against you, Jack," said she. "I don't seem able to do what's right. But I know that I'm not for you. If you love me, go away! If you love me! Oh, I never dreamed that you cared what became of me, Jack! That I never dreamed!"

"Because you never noticed me. Or else you would've seen it when I looked at you, Kate. You would sure've seen that!"

"I never noticed. I thought you were always laughing, sort of, and not caring! I thought you were sort of laughing at me a lot of the time!"

"Why, every time that you took a step, it seemed to me that you were walkin' right on my heart, Kate."

"Ah!" said she, and she moved toward him a little, and stopped, trembling.

"I've loved you to the tip of your fingers, Kate. And when I danced with you, I used to ache and sorrow, because I wanted to kiss your hand that was on my arm!"

And he raised one of her hands, and kissed the fingers. They flinched from him; and then suddenly clutched his.

"Ah, what am I going to do, Jack!" said she.

"You're gunna forget me," said he. "I'm nobody, now. I never was much. I was only a farm hand, and now I'm driven out. I've got no friends. Marshal Kinney will hunt me down like a dog till he's filled me with lead. You know that he never stops. You gotta forget me, or, if you think of me at all, will you just remember that whether the sun's hot or whether the wind's cold, I'm loving you, Kate?"

She tried to speak; he leaned over her and kissed the lips as she stirred, and again, and again. And he saw the sorrow pass out of her eyes, and the tears, and they were left so clear that he could look into them an eternal distance, like the blue of

evening in a May-day sky. And in all that eternal distance he saw nothing but love that was his.

In that mild opening of her eyes, and in the profoundness of that giving of herself, even the reckless youth in Jack Aberdeen grew abashed and shrank small, and his own careless heart was overwhelmed and half frightened, so that he could become aware of other things than of her, and particularly of a tall shadow which stood at the other door of the room.

He looked askance, and there stood the tall form of the marshal of Debney Wells, that famous man! The Colt which hung from his hand glimmered with a pale blue-gray beauty.

And Jack Aberdeen deliberately leaned and kissed the girl again. The marshal must see that, the seal of conquest!

"You sneakin', stealin' curl" shouted the marshal.

The girl gave back from the boy with a cry; she seemed to be swept from his arms by a wind, and he leaped backward through the doorway.

Anger had shaken the sure hand of the marshal a little, and the bullet he fired merely kissed the air in front of the boy's face. Then, with his left hand, Jack slammed the door; another bullet punched through it, and let out a ray of light; but the key was in the lock, and he turned it, just as the charge of the marshal brought him against the door.

Happy Jack jumped over the porch railing and ran through the rear truck garden; he was over the alley fence as the door crashed before the shoulder of William Kinney, and as the marshal stumbled out into the darkness, the boy looked back.

And it seemed to him that the staggering, lurching form was the very type and symbol of gross might and clumsiness, refuted and defeated by a finer touch. The big marshal was checkmated, his game spoiled, his great strength turned into his greatest weakness, his glory dimmed!

So thought Happy Jack, and running laughing down the alley, he rounded the back of the barn and came to the big gray mare, and mounted her.

She could do anything. There was no test asked of her which she would refuse to attempt, and that the whole community

well knew; so he put her for a mild trial at the first fence which crossed the field, and she went winging her way across it; and then over another, and the stubble was like velvet beneath her stride. A silver stream crossed that blackness; she flew the bright-faced water, and the boy, looking back, saw the lights of the town growing dim, and gathering together behind him. Soon they would vanish, and his old life along with them. Only the new lay before him.

CHAPTER XV

ON A STOLEN HORSE

Northward rode Happy Jack.

The next morning he was seen in the little village of Teteran, which he entered, bought a post card and a stamp, and there wrote out a message, which he addressed to the editor of the Debney Wells *Bugle*.

The letter said:

Dear Mr. Editor: Here I am on the way for Canada because I hope that the woods may be thick enough there to hide me from Bill Kinney, the great man-catcher. Will you tell Bill that I took his mare according to the bet that we made, with witnesses, and if he wants the saddle which I found on the mare, he's welcome to sell my cutting horse which I left behind and the saddle that is on it and buy himself the finest saddle that he can find. You might give Bill my love and tell him he ought to learn to dance.

Happy Jack.

This message he wrote in small letters, in a neat, precise handwriting, and then he posted it, took Rags, and left the town on the northern trail.

A thin, small rain was falling, the mountains were lost behind it, only butting a shoulder through the mist, now and again, and the day was very cold; but that was not the reason that made the boy turn south.

He had planned to do that long before, and having laid seventy-five miles behind him, traveling due north, he journeyed until he came to a gravel-bottomed draw which turned due east.

Along this he went during several hours, keeping Rags at a good pace; in the middle afternoon he abandoned it and went south again. He felt that he had left a considerable trail prob-

lem behind him, considering the length of time he had traveled without sighting a human being, and now that he was headed south, he was feeling more and more secure.

Not that he took this matter very seriously. It was all in the manner of a gigantic joke upon the marshal. For that man the boy had achieved an enormous aversion, and though he had told no one of the marshal's theft of the eighty dollars and the cruel nature of the trial which he had been forced to undergo, yet he attributed everything to the marshal's fault.

He had not talked of this item, simply because the marshal had personally confessed the matter to him, and for that reason it was sacred to the boy. Such was his code of honor—a very odd and patchwork code, as has been seen already and as will be seen still more fully in the future. However, the marshal was to blame, and Jack's one object in all of his maneuvers was not to achieve safety for himself, but merely failure for the marshal.

That famous man was bound to start upon this trail, and having done so, he must be foiled and baffled at every hand. In due time the judge would arrive in Debney Wells, examine the case of the escaped prisoner, and discover there was nothing to say against him!

Then, fully exonerated, the dream of the boy was that he would return to Debney Wells and, in the middle hour of the day, he would snap his fingers under the nose of the marshal, and express his thoughts about the man of law in full and in front of the largest possible congregation of the curious.

But this delightful moment would lose all its point unless he managed to escape from the hands of the marshal during the chase that was sure to follow.

He must utterly evade William Kinney, and thereby make the famous man to appear as a fool in the eyes of the community.

Such were the ideas of the fugitive, as he rode south. Four days he traveled, keeping the mare within her strength, but, nevertheless, voyaging almost with the steadiness of a sailing ship in the trades, for the power and the endurance of Rags were enormous. She could not be worn out, it appeared, and

every morning her eye was as fresh and as clear as when the journey began.

At the end of the fourth day he reached a nest of mountains from which he looked down on a little cross-road town, and when the end of the day was lost in the dark of the evening, he went nearer, and pilfered half a side of bacon, some corn flour, some baking powder, some coffee, matches, and a newspaper to wrap these articles, all taken from a prosperous-looking grocery store.

When he got back to his camp and had cooked a hearty supper, and eaten it, as he drank his third cup of black coffee, he spread out the paper and read it by the firelight.

He did not have to go far to find an item of interest, for it was a small local paper, and all across the front page were spilled the lurid details of his escape from the jail in Debney Wells. They made it a big matter; but there was much which he had not known about before, and, above all, the subhead line was of interest, for it said that he was wanted for "Murder, Jail-breaking, and Theft!"

The "murder" was the purely justifiable matter of the killing of Charlie Lake, of course. The jail-breaking was perhaps hardly so easily got over.

It appeared that in the eyes of the law it made very little difference whether he had drilled his way through that steel cell, or the crowd had come in and unlocked it for him. His place was in the jail until the law, in the person of its appointed officer, liberated him and told him that he was a free man.

The editor continued:

Jails are made to contain fools; wise men can be left at large until their cases are tried! Fools and criminals will not wait to receive their dues. And this unfortunate youngster, having raised a riot and found his cell door open, thought he was profiting by it when he walked out. Never was there a more mistaken idea. It is a vast crime to commit a murder; but in this case the killing appears to have been highly justifiable. Marshal Kinney himself declares so, and assures us that the arrest was performed by him merely to satisfy the forms of the law. There was no

scruple of evidence that the slaying of Charlie Lake was anything but purest self-defense. This foolish boy, however, has now placed against his name the very serious offense of jail-breaking, and in addition to that, the disgrace of stealing.

He was a jail breaker, that was clear, even if the crowd had done the breaking.

But theft?

To be sure, he was at this moment relishing stolen food, but he hardly looked upon that as a crime. The law had been at fault, according to his reasoning, in driving him into the wilderness. Therefore, he had taken food for himself, and he had taken it in a place where its loss would cause no undue suffering.

So Happy Jack said to himself, but the newspaper reported a more serious and direct crime of larceny.

He actually had stolen the saddle, the bridle, and the saddlebag of the marshal himself!

He, afterward, had written back to Debney Wells and instructed that his own horse and saddle could be used to redeem the property of the marshal and soothe his hurt feelings, but that was not sufficient, apparently.

The marshal wanted back his own property. The taker of it was a thief and as a thief he was being hunted down.

What did these things mean, then, but a long term in prison if he were captured? There were sentences for brawling and gun fighting; but those were rarely as long as the sentences for such things as jail-breaking and theft.

He wondered how long the term would be. He had heard of men being sent to prison for twenty-five years. That was for a stage robbery. Perhaps his own crimes would not get such a long sentence, but considering that jail-breaking went with the other, who could tell?

Take only half of the twenty-five years. Call it twelve. He stood facing a twelve-year sentence, he told himself—it will be seen that the boy was very young indeed!—and at the end of that term he would be exactly—thirty-two years old!

He thought of it with a shudder. He called up before him the faces of other men of thirty-two, their hair already touched

with gray, in many cases, their faces hard and lined, or puffed with fat, the joy and the spring of life already gone out of them!

Thirty-two! He would be thirty-two before the law would finish its workings of vengeance upon him.

This he thought out to himself gloomily, and then suddenly he stood up and walked to the edge of the hill and looked into the black of the gully. There he saw the eyes of the town, the glimmering lights. They had seemed friendly enough when he came away with his small booty, but now it seemed to him that the dogs of the law were crouched down there, ready to bait him!

He actually shook his balled fist at the lights, and to himself he swore that he never would give himself up. They would have to fight for him if they were to take him!

Then he went back, and he hastily put out his fire. He felt that he had been a fool in allowing that fire to burn in that manner, only partially screened among the rocks upon the shoulder of the hill. And lest any eye should have seen the light and followed it, he gathered his trappings and moved at once to a new camp.

The next morning he arranged his affairs according to the new light by which he viewed them.

First of all, he sacrificed everything, except that which was essential to life. Then he prepared for swift traveling, and light traveling. All he needed, eventually, was a sound horse, a gun, ammunition, and salt. He could live on the land, as he went south!

And that was what he did.

He cared less about speed in his marches now. What he prized was secrecy. Most of his travels were executed after the darkness had begun; or in the day if he were in an absolute wilderness and could pick out a trail where he was not likely to encounter any other human eye! In this way he averaged marches of some forty miles a day, and that rate he continued for three weeks.

At the end of that time he was in the southern desert. He had left the mountains, and they were blue and dim behind

him; three or four hundred leagues away was the scene of his crime, and he could fairly well promise himself that, since the time when he had shown himself in the town from which he sent the post card—showed himself on the false trail, in fact—no man had laid eye upon him!

In the meantime, all things about him were changed.

Twice he had made night excursions into towns on the way south, and from them he had taken new clothes, and burned his old ones afterward. He had altered in appearance, growing thinner. His face was darkly browned and lean. A perpendicular crease was beginning to appear between his eyes. He had grown a young mustache, and a short beard was gathering on his chin.

So, at the end of nearly a month of travel, he determined that he could risk a visit to the haunts of man.

CHAPTER XVI

NEWS FROM A NUISANCE

He had very little apprehension. He had read many a tale of the exploits of the brigands of older days, and how even such a famous fellow as Joaquin Murieta had ventured repeatedly inside the California villages, well-known as he was. Now and again he was recognized, and had to shoot down a man or two as he galloped breezily away. Still, he continually dared that danger, which meant that most of the time he went freely back and forth and was not recognized. But Murieta was a famous man, known for a thousand crimes. He, young Jack Aberdeen, had surely never been heard of in this southern region!

So he went cheerfully on toward the first town that he spotted. It looked a prosperous place. A river ran near to it, and around one of its leisurely bends green color spread out upon either side. He knew that that meant irrigated land, and where there was irrigation there was some money, at least.

The town looked one of two or three thousand—a fair-sized place. And that was what he wanted. In little cross-roads places every idler speculates upon every stranger, turning over a hundred possibilities in his mind, and of those speculators, one might hit upon the truth.

But this place was large enough. A stranger would not cause a pause in its affairs, a concentration of its attention.

Even Rags was a good deal altered. She would still take any eye, to be sure, but she had lost her sleek and glossy surface. Her coat was staring a little, the effects of long-continued hard work and poor diet; she was thin; her head was lower, her eye not so bright. She now appeared, to a casual glance, simply an extremely good horse, and not the heart-stopping beauty that she had been before.

So, all in all, the boy felt safe when he entered the town of Harbridge.

It was exactly the sort of a place that he had expected to find. It was too big to be called a village—in this part of the world—and it was too small to have achieved any sense of dignity and self-importance. No civic consciousness had been awakened in Harbridge, and none would be awakened there, moreover, for long to come!

There were littered front yards, beside neat ones, and trees here bordering the street, and yonder half a dozen had been cut down to make firewood, and a Chinese laundry leaned its frail shoulders against the courthouse.

The more he saw of the place the more at ease he was.

He went on, not to the big hotel which had the white-painted front, but to a smaller place farther down the street—a smaller and a more ancient hostelry, with weather-darkened wooden pillars staggering along its front veranda, and, before this, a string of wooden horse-troughs half filled with water which was coated with green scum along the edges.

He chose the cleanest of these, and the gray mare thrust in her head almost to the eyes.

"She drinks pretty well," said an old man, rocking forward in his chair until all four of its legs were settled upon the floor. "I'd say that she's dry, all right."

"She's dry, all right," said the boy.

"Dry hoss, dry rider," said the old man.

The boy nodded.

And he looked across the street toward the saloon. He had not the slightest temptation to enter it. In the old days it would have been his first resort, but in this past month a knife had fallen and cut his life into two portions, of which the latter had nothing to do with what went before.

Red-eye whisky meant a clouded brain, a shaking hand, a foolishness of muscles and nerves. He could not afford to run himself into such a darkness of mind when other men might be walking in the sober light. Moreover, the thought of drinking whisky appeared to him a little disgusting; his lip curled a trifle. That sort of thing was far behind him!

When the mare had drunk her fill, he looked about for the entrance to the stable.

"Hutchison's, right on down there," said the old man, "they got the best hay in town. They got some wild oats an' barley mixed that you wouldn't beat for a hoss, I'll tell a man. You don't need to feed no grain along with hay like that!"

The boy thanked him and went straightway down the street to Hutchison's.

There he stabled the mare. With his own hands he rubbed her down with a wisp of hay until she stopped sweating. He brushed out her mane. He washed her eyes clear of the desert dust, and he washed her legs below knee and hock. He always had a feeling that this washing of the legs must cool an animal, as it does a man to plunge his wrists into water.

Then he adjusted the window, so that the shutter allowed just enough air to pass in, and finally he took his knife and scraped the inside of the wet blanket, and shook it out in a single sheet, and hung it where the sun would dry it, and the wind would sweeten it.

When all these preparations were ended, he went back and looked again at the mare.

Her welfare had become more to him than his own rest, his own content, his own food, and sleep, and pleasure. When he went to bed at night he did not sleep well unless her eyes were clear; when he wakened in the morning, he always sat up with a start and stared at her. She was his safety, his ticket of leave, the long, strong hand which pushed away the dangers of the law!

This preparation of the mare being finished, he sauntered out into the sunlight.

It was blazing hot. It burned with such a strength that its fiery finger tips pressed down through the shoulders of his coat and scorched his skin, and a spurt of fume went up into his brain. And yet it did not make him feel uncomfortable.

Without danger, anything was endurable. He would have been willing, he felt, to live in the midst of Death Valley for the rest of his days, if so be that he could do so in quiet! Without that long-reaching shadow of the law threatening to fall before him! It had become more than the danger of twelve years

in prison which he feared. It had become the mere fear of fear, which is the blindest and the most powerful of all things.

He went back to the little old hotel, and his informant greeted him cheerfully from the veranda.

"Must be a plumb racer that you got there," said the old man, "the length of time that you spend on it!"

The boy looked askance at the speaker. He had not thought of that. And the last thing he wished to draw attention to was the superlative excellence of the mare.

"I got to talkin' to the stable hand," said he.

"That'd be the gent with the freckles?"

"Yes."

"He's a mighty talented liar, is Sim. You could go for a long ways, and still you wouldn't meet up with any gent that was a freer and a larger liar than Sim is. There is others that's more quicker, and neater, and likelier in their lyin'; but Sim, he's got a flow like a river, and before you get through restin' your eyes on one lie, he's rolled you out another, and goes right on. I been around and heard Sim talk for three hour on end, and never stop to draw a breath, and never tell one true thing. Kind of nice feller, Sim is, though. The boys always likes to have him around, and he's good and soothin' for hosses. I reckon that your hoss won't need to have no soothin', though. Looks like she'd stand without hitchin' for a while."

And he laughed a little, and then nodded.

The boy smiled faintly. He would be glad to escape from this old man, and his too-keen observation. He went to the front door and paused there.

"That ain't the way into the dinin' room," said his informant. "You come along this way. Here you are. I'll show you!"

He led the way. He said over his shoulder: "I could see with half an eye that you been out for a long time. Wouldn't have to take a look at the two-ply hitch you got on the belly of your hoss to see that you come out of the north!" He chuckled at his own wisdom.

But the boy was more and more uneasy. Already it appeared patent that he had come on a long journey, that his horse was very tired, and that he was from the north.

How many more observations would be necessary before it was clear that he was Happy Jack Aberdeen, the man who was wanted by the law for murder, jail-breaking, and theft? Then, half desperately, he determined that he would not turn his back upon this danger, but invite it to sit down with him, and face it, eye to eye.

The other accepted the invitation at once. He wasn't hungry, he declared, but he could always use a snack of ham and eggs. He never seen the time, he said, when it wasn't a shame to turn down good vittles.

They took a corner table. It was after the usual lunch hour, and the room was deserted. A sour-faced waiter came shambling, with a waiter's sore-footed amble, and took the order. He went away, giving an impatient jerk to the dingy napkin which was slung across his arm.

The boy broke a crust of stale bread and began to eat, absently, swiftly. He thought he never had tasted food so delicious. Peace began to steal over his soul. He leaned back in his chair, and the top rung of the back fitted comfortably across his shoulder muscles.

"What's your business in life, young feller, havin' a good time?" asked his guest.

"My business is huntin' a job."

"Is it? Then you come to a likely enough place. What sort of a job are you looking for?"

"Why, cows, likely."

"Punchin'?"

"Yes."

"Cows here, too. More minin', though. Know that game?"

"No. You a miner?"

"Ask 'em down in Mexico. That's where I served my time. That's where I got tired, too, and learned to enjoy just settin' still and waitin'."

"For what?"

"News. Like Marshal Kinney brung in here this mornin'."

The boy listened, stunned. Kinney here! Hastily he broke bread again.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT MAKES FRIENDSHIP

If Kinney was there, the whole town reeked with danger! If Kinney was there, this very room was like the open mouth of a cannon, yawning at him. He began to look at the old man as at a species of demidemon, so great was the chill that struck through him at this news. And then his heart rose again, and his eye brightened. His nerve had been shaken, to be sure, but it was not frayed.

Let Marshal Kinney be never so near, he, Happy Jack, was not yet a prisoner. He continued with the subject of the marshal.

"Marshal Kinney? That ought not to be Marshal William Kinney, ought it?"

"What other Kinney would it be?" asked the old man.

"But he's up north."

"Sure he is, when he's to home; but he'd rather be on a man trail any time than sittin' in his parlor swapping lies with his men. He's on a man trail now."

"I been out of touch with things for a long spell," said the boy. "What trail's he followin'?"

"Why, who but the kid?" asked the other. And he leaned back in his chair and chuckled.

The boy watched him, fascinated. The longer he was near this old fellow, the more interested he became, for the longer he was close, the more clearly he perceived that the oldster was by no means as feeble as he had appeared at the first glance. There was plenty of light in the eye of this man, buried as it was under deep eyebrows which were like bits of gray brush. They consisted of a close fur, and then long, projecting hairs that thrust out an inch from the face. And the face itself had good, strong lines about the jaw and the mouth. All that was needed was to waken the fellow and rouse him to his own capabilities, felt the boy; but time seemed to have rusted the

spirit and the body of the gossip. He was fitted only to relax and idly to talk.

"What kid?" asked Aberdeen.

"What kid is there but one?" asked the other.

"Well, there's a lot of kids in the world," said Jack.

"Includin' you," chuckled his new acquaintance.

"Well, yes—includin' me!"

"This is young Happy Jack Aberdeen, from up in Debney Wells. Ever hear of him?"

The boy looked at the ceiling for a moment.

"Aberdeen? Why, sure I have," he said, brightly remembering. "I've heard of him, but mostly always as Happy Jack. He's a sort of a town idler and good-for-nothing. And it seems to me that I heard some talk, a while back, about him getting into a gun fight."

The old man stretched himself more comfortably in his chair.

"Is that all that you know?" said he. "I could tell you something more, though!"

"Well, let's have it. The chuck hasn't showed up yet."

"Why, this here town idler, that you've been talking about, he up and got into a fight with Charlie Lake. Ever hear of him?"

"Yes. He was a tough one. Did he eat up Happy Jack?"

"Jack slammed him dead as nails!" said the other with a violent relish.

"Happy Jack?"

"Sure he did."

"But Happy was a sort of a skinny feller, wasn't he?"

"Yep. No bigger than you. But he was a nacheral strong man. He got a hold of Charlie Lake and made a baby out of him, and then put a bullet between his eyes as neat as you please."

"Somehow that sounds mighty strange to me."

"I suppose it does. The marshal—the kid was workin' on big Kinney's place—took him to jail, and on the way in he bet his hoss agin' the marshal's hoss that he'd be out in a week!"

"Hey! Did he?"

"He did."

"The poor loon!"

"Why, boy," said the other, "he done it, too! He got the crowd worked up by singing to them, and talkin' to them out of the window of the jail, and they rushed the jail while the marshal was away at his girl's house. The kid got away, grabbed the marshal's hoss and off he goes! They never got near him since!"

"Never seen him, even?"

"Only once. He was headed north, and they had a sight of him the next day. He sent a post card back to the editor in Debney Wells. He's a cool fellow, that kid!"

"But if the kid went north, and the marshal's on his trail, why should the marshal be here?"

"I dunno. The fact is that they's apt to be a lot of windings in pretty near any trail!"

"You mean that the kid may've doubled back?"

"Why, sure he might've."

"Maybe the marshal is just anglin' in the dark."

"He's got a hungry look," said the other thoughtfully, "and if he's fishin', I'll bet that he can eat what he catches, and eat it raw! He's mighty riled. They say that he's aged considerable, and his hair took on a gray turn mighty quick!"

"Do they?" asked the boy, keenly interested.

"Why, look what's happened! Lost a lot of reputation in that one day, didn't he? Had a man get away from him, make a fool out of him. Then they say that when he went back to his girl's house, this here Happy Jack was there before him, and they say that Jack and the girl wasn't a whole room apart and—"

He tipped back his head and laughed with enjoyment of the thought—laughed until his mustaches shook.

"Anyway, that must've been the stroke that turned him gray, to say nothin' of the losing of his hoss." He wagged his head.

"I've heard that it was a fine hoss that he rode," said the boy.

"Yep. A fine mare."

"A big one, I'd reckon, seein' that he's such a big man," said the boy, taking up the perilous subject because of its very peril, and watching his companion closely.

"Yes, sir, a man could reckon on that. A big mare, but not more'n sixteen hands. About the exact size of your mare, I'd say."

The boy winced. That shot had struck him between wind and water, and made him decidedly ill at ease.

And his companion went on glibly: "Matter of fact, she had about the same colorin', too. Dapple all over, like the spottin' of a leopard, and finished off with black points all around, and a black muzzle, onto the rest, and even black tips onto her ears—exactly like the ears of your mare, out yonder, that you think so much of, son!"

This he said in a drawling voice, but as he spoke, his eyes were fixed straight upon the face of the boy, and young Jack Aberdeen, with cold in his blood, looked past his companion and knew the truth.

He had been recognized. In the very first glance, no doubt, he had been recognized by this lounger! And now he sat at a table in the very same town which contained Marshal William Kinney—

Suddenly he lounged back in his chair and laughed a little.

"Well," said he, "it's a long trail that don't bring a man home sooner or later. Here comes our chuck. Eat hearty, old-timer!"

The hot plates were rattled down before them; they began to eat, and certainly the stranger showed an excellent appetite, and when the boy ordered an extra dish, he also was easily persuaded to accept.

He clung to the same pointedly disagreeable subject.

"Funny thing," said he, "that I've been around the West a pile, and I've never seen two hosses that agreed more in shape and size and color than the gray mare of the marshal's that Happy Jack is on, and the gray mare that you've rode into this here town and—"

"Look here!" said Jack Aberdeen with a sudden gravity.

But the other did not seem to hear. He continued:

"They'll take good care of her, though, over there across the street. You mention that I sent you over there?"

"Matter of fact, I think I did."

"Then they'll take good care of her. They're mighty well

used to me having my friends take their hosses over there, and every one of my young friends they got hosses like the gray mare—blood hosses is what they all ride!"

He nodded, admiring the very idea.

And Happy Jack watched him silently, feeling that something more was coming. He took a close stock of the situation.

The wall angled just at his back, and, therefore, he was sheltered from attack upon two sides. On the right, two doors opened, so that guests in number might get quickly to their tables and quickly out again, after the Western manner of eating on the run.

On his left there was a big window, half open, and standing not more than six feet above the ground. He told himself that, in case of need, he could fling himself through that window, feet first, and be out of the room and safely on the ground in a single second. They would have to shoot him on the wing if they shot him at all.

In addition, he would be in an excellent position to make a flying start for the mare, speeding down the side of the old hotel and then heading across the street for the stable. So thorough were his calculations that he was able to resurvey his mental picture of the stable and all its surroundings, and to decide that it would be better to jump the mare over a rear fence than to attempt to bring her out and ride her down the street for liberty.

All these mental preparations did not occupy a long pause in the conversation. But they left him forearmed, as it were.

"You know a lot about hosses," said he.

"Sure," said the other. "Sure I do."

"Raised with 'em?"

"I was a buster when I was a kid. That's where I got my name."

"What name is that?"

" 'Champ' Logan."

"Champ?"

"They used to call me that, because I collected for the boys pretty often at the rodeos, and what not. They used to call me Champ, because of that."

"Well, Champ," said the boy, "I've had a fine time here chinnin' with you. I better be rollin' along now."

"Won't have a drink?"

"Never had no fondness for it."

"Well, you better. I'm buyin' drinks, son."

He rattled money in his pocket, and the boy smiled.

"You sound pretty flush, Champ."

"Well, I'll tell you how it is," confided the old man, with a glow in his eye, "my boys, they pretty nigh always keep me fairly well supplied."

"You have some sons, eh?"

"Not sons, no. They ain't my sons, but I think just as much of 'em as though they was my real sons, and they think just as much of me, I'd say! We're a mighty close lot!"

"They're the ones that ride the blood hosses?"

"Them are the very ones, friend. Them are the very ones! There ain't hardly a time that they come into town, one of 'em, that he don't pass me over a hundred, or a thousand, or a lot more, maybe!"

The boy sat up straight in his chair.

Either Champ Logan was a little mad—or there was something else wrong with him.

He was making a cigarette now with the patiently clumsy fingers of any other old man; but when he looked up from the lighting of it, his eyes, through the mist of thick brows, were as young and as bright as the eyes of any youth. He was smiling a little, and that smile was all in the eyes, and none at all upon the lips of Logan.

"You get a hundred or a thousand at a crack?" said Jack Aberdeen. "Well, that's the sort of friends to have!"

Champ Logan made a gesture.

"Taking and giving," said he, "that's what makes friendship, I should say. And that's why the boys and me get on so well."

"You give something to them, Champ?"

"Sure. I give 'em ideas."

"What sort of ideas?"

"Why, ideas about where they can get the next soft safe, or stick up the next train, and little things like that!"

CHAPTER XVIII

FOR OR AGAINST?

THIS he said without making the slightest effort to lower his voice, and the boy hardly could believe his ears. A man does not ordinarily sit down at table with a stranger and confess that he is the guardian and directing spirit of a gang of robbers. But this old fellow had no shame, and apparently he had no fear of public opinion.

Hastily, Happy Jack looked around him, but, after all, there was no one near, and the booming voice of the other apparently had been wasted upon the naked walls of the room.

"They use me other ways a pretty good deal," said Champ Logan. "Keepin' here on the spot I learn a lot of things that are happenin'. It'd surprise you a good deal if you was to know how valuable it is just to have a chance to read the newspapers every day. And I read 'em every day. They'll find me down there in the newspaper room of the library every day of the year, along with the other bums that are readin' there! But I'm readin' with care. They's always little items that means a lot to me and to my boys! Sometimes I hear about something in Denver, and sometimes I hear about something in Tucson that'll make things easier for us to get onto a trail, or to get off of it. I'll tell you what, young man, these here modern reporters they're a mighty sight of use in keepin' a progressive crook from gettin' his fingers caught when the law gets ready to put out its hand and pinch!"

The boy studied his companion, and then smiled suddenly.

"Who are you, Champ?" he asked.

"I ain't been aiming to keep anything back," said the other. "Does it look like I been talkin' out of a cloud?"

Said Jack: "You run a plant for crooked work, with a lot of helpers. Is that it?"

"Why, you couldn't've said it shorter, though you might've said it sweeter," declared Logan.

"And you let the town know about it?"

"The town? Why, son, that's a funny question to ask! The town figgers me as a harmless old gossip. I go around and I pick up an odd job now and then, and I get a little spending money that way. And, once in a while, I got a sort of a cousin back East that sends me out a slice of a melon!"

He paused and chuckled, his sides shaking in his contented mirth.

"That's the way that I get on," said he.

The boy slowly nodded. "This is sort of your office, Champ?"

"That's right. The front veranda of this here little old hotel is my office, and while I'm sittin' here, sometimes the boys drop in, one by one, and they get news from me, or they give me news, and sometimes they give me more than news, too."

"And you live in town all the time?"

"I got an old shack out by the river, where I raise a patch of vegetables and such truck, and a mite of hay and grain for my hosses, and something over to sell."

The boy's eyes began to kindle. "They never suspect you!" he exclaimed.

"Not unless you tip them the wink."

"But where's your fun? Where's your game out of it all, Champ?"

"The game's in lying close to the ground and hearing the hosses tramp along. The game is in knowin' what nobody else knows. The game is in watchin' the marshals, and the sheriffs, and all the deputies stalkin' around and raising heck. There's the sheriff now!"

A long-stepping, rangy man came swiftly into the room and made for the table.

"Hey, Champ," said he, "I hear that you been wantin' to see me?"

"Sure I been. Set down here. Here's a young friend of mine that's been buyin' the old man a hand-out. This here is 'Montana Joe' Murphy, Sheriff Dickens."

"Hullo, Montana, how's things?" said the sheriff, shaking hands.

"Drag up a chair, sheriff," invited the boy. "Have some coffee with us?"

"No. I've done feedin'. What's the news that you got for me, Champ?"

"Fact is," said Champ, "it's likely news that'll put somebody inside of your jail for you."

The sheriff drew in a quick breath and his eyes sparkled.

"You up and tell me, Champ. What's it all about?"

"Why, you heard of the Connell brothers?"

"Yes, sure I have."

"It's them!"

"In this here county?"

"They are."

"Champ," said the sheriff, "I'd give a thousand to lay my hands on 'em!"

"Well," said Champ, "I'll tell you what. I went out on a ride for stretchin' of the legs of that new bay colt of mine, and I found him goin' along so good that I didn't hold him in, and the first thing that I knew, I was over in the region of the Kitchen Buttes."

"Yeah?" queried the excited sheriff.

"I was goin' along there, sort of in hopes of seein' a rabbit or something jump up, when along comes a couple of gents on good, long-legged hosses. Those hosses looked mighty tired, and so did the men that was ridin' of them, and thin, and hadn't shaved for eight or nine days. They looked at my nice fresh colt like they would eat him. We said howd'ye, and I went along. I give 'em a good, bright smile, because I didn't want that they should think I guessed anything. But I had guessed something. It was the Connell brothers sure enough."

"The Connell brothers! I thought that they was up in Nevada?"

"The way that they ride, it don't take them long to jump a couple of States."

"No, I suppose it don't. Kitchen Buttes, you said?"

"Aye."

"I wonder if they'd stay there? I wonder if they'd lay up there for a while?"

"Of course they would! By the looks of their hosses, they wouldn't be moving for four or five days, I should think."

"If they're there—" said the sheriff, spreading out one hand like the talons of a bird about to clutch a prey.

"If they are, you got 'em! Sure they'll be there. I'll tell you why. This season of the year they're plenty of grass, and plenty of water at the Kitchen Buttes, and besides, it's some place to hide, if you want to hide."

"Aye, but it's a place that can be combed from head to foot by ten men in an hour."

"Of course it can."

"The Connell brothers! They'd be worth taking!"

The sheriff sprang up from his chair. He caught at the hand of Champ Logan and wrung it.

"Logan, it's simply a marvelous thing," said he, "how you're able to spot these people! You've saved my life, if you've turned over the Connells to me. I tell you what, Logan, your worth ought to be recognized. The county ought to settle a pension on you for the way that you've turned in the crooks."

Logan raised a deprecatory hand.

"Don't you go sayin' a word about it, please!" said he. "Heaven gave me an eye for rememberin' faces, and that's all that there is to it. Look you here, Dickens! If you go to spreading around things what I've told you, some of the friends of the Connell brothers they'll up and smash a couple of bullets through this old head of mine!"

"All right then, all right," said the sheriff. "I sure won't say a word. I won't say a word! I'll keep it all quiet. But—a thousand thanks, old man."

He had to shake the hand of Champ Logan again, and then he rushed out of the room, and could be heard running down the hall outside.

"He'll go a-foamin' and a-ragin' and a-tearin' along," said Champ Logan, "with about a score of men, and they'll throw themselves out in a noose around the Kitchen Buttes—"

"And find nothin'?" asked the boy.

"Nothin'? I hope to tell you that they'll find something, young feller. They'll find the Connell brothers sure as the fact that I didn't see them with my own eyes!"

"I don't understand then."

"Why, a couple of my boys found 'em and sent me in word. There goes the sheriff to do my work for me. He cleans out the county of all the crooks, except my boys! We don't have no competition! The minute we spot any other hawks in the sky, we show him the way; and Dickens sure is a fightin' man, only he's got no more eye than a chicken in a coop. He needs to be showed the way home!"

"He's mighty keen, though," said the boy.

"Keen? He fights because he loves fightin', he loves the law; he's gunna have this county as clean as a new-scrubbed floor, one of these days, he says!"

Champ Logan chuckled again until his sides shook.

"But he catches mighty few, except by the suggestions that we throw his way. When he follers up the clues that we give him, he nearly always wins. And that's what keeps him in his job and lets him have a reputation as a man catcher, and that's what keeps me and the boys so safe and warm and cozy in this here county. And that's one reason that I wanted you to meet him, Jack."

The boy nodded. It was clear that Champ Logan knew exactly what he was about.

"You've got something more to say to me, I take it," said he.

"Well," said Champ, "those that ain't with me mostly are agin' me. And if you ain't on my side, I'd say that you're on the other side."

"Suppose I'm on no side at all, but just passin' through?"

"Do as you please. I'm showin' you a good, safe lead, anyways. You gotta wait, and you gotta mark time for a while, son, and where could you do it better or live easier than right down here, workin' with my boys? You'll find them a jolly lot, and a straight ridin' and shootin' crew. What you say, Happy Jack?"

Jack hesitated and then shook his head.

"If you take me, you take the marshal on my heels, as he seems to be."

"We'll lose him in this county. We know the hills too dang well for him to foller. Beside, what if he meets up with you? You've stood him off before, and maybe you can again!"

Happy Jack shook his head with decision. "I've been straight. I'll stay straight now," said he.

CHAPTER XIX

MARSHAL VERSUS MARE

With a groan of disgust, Champ Logan shook his head.

"There I go," said he, "playin' in my usual bad luck! Dog-gone me, in a short while I would've found you ripe and ready for the trouble that you gotta live by sooner or later. But here I pick you up when your skin ain't yet been rubbed raw and the salt laid on top of the sore spots!" He sighed. "It's my luck!" said he. "And I lose the best-lookin' prospect that's come to me in years and years, maybe ever!"

"Even with the marshal after me?"

"He's a big man, and a great man, and a wise man, is the marshal," said the other, "but I dunno that he ever was up agin' an organizer like me. Besides, he's workin' with the sheriff, and that means that I'd know all his plans, because the sheriff he won't do a thing without talkin' it over on the side with me!" He winked. "He's had about all of his success that way. And even when he don't catch what he's after, he comes so close to 'em that they can smell the smoke of the lightnin' bolt as it goes by!"

He laughed. "You're fixed in your mind, son?"

"I'm fixed," said Happy Jack.

"Mind you, when you get another idea, you come back this way and let me know. My door is always open to you. In a manner of speakin', verandas ain't got any doors, have they?"

A little whistle floated through the window, hardly louder than the whistle of a bird.

Old Champ Logan with wonderful agility left his chair and leaned at the window.

"Well?" he said guardedly. "You danged chucklehead, didn't I tell you to keep out of my sight?"

"I didn't want to come, but I had to. You dunno what's happened. Marshal Kinney has found the gray mare!"

With that news—which had been barely audible to the boy, in spite of the care with which it was spoken—Happy came out of his chair with an equal speed.

"It's too late," said Champ Logan, and he instantly added: "It's my fault. I've kept you here talkin' too long."

He whirled and asked of the man under the window: "What's he doing?"

"Left a man at the stable, and he's started back here for this hotel!"

Red madness streaked across the eyes of the boy.

"He'll find me, then," said he, and he faced toward the door.

Champ Logan took his arm. "Don't be foolish," he cautioned. "Get out of here, will you? You want to go straight some day. Can you go straight with the killing of a marshal on your hands?"

Happy Jack hesitated.

"The kid's coming through the rear door," said Champ through the window. "You take him, Hank, and get him away. Take him home!"

Then he turned and jerked the boy around.

"Start moving! Go through that door and straight down the hall. At the back door you'll find Hank waiting. He's square. Trust him!"

Nothing is so compelling as perfect assurance in a crisis.

Happy Jack automatically obeyed. He was more or less stunned by what he had heard, and by the knowledge that Rags had been taken from him. Thin and tired as she was, he felt that there was hardly a horse on the range that could follow her stretching gallop for a single hour.

Champ Logan was putting some silver on the table.

"You left this to pay. Get!" said he.

And the boy "got."

He was out the door in a moment, and hurrying down the hall. It angled to the side, and as he turned the angle, he had the faintest and most shadowy glimpse of a big man coming in from the front of the house. He went on, stepping rapidly,

lightly, waiting for a sound of running behind him. But that sound did not come. He reached the rear door and, going out, he saw there a lofty man, painfully thin, with an emaciated, woeful face that was set off with a pair of old-fashioned, drooping mustaches.

"This way, kid," said Hank.

He turned his back, but the boy jumped to his side and caught his arm.

"How many did the marshal leave with the mare at the stable?"

"One man. He—"

"I'm going back that way, then."

"You're crazy," stated Hank, without haste and without emphasis. "That's Tom Campbell that's back there at the stable. Does that change your mind?"

The picture of Tom Campbell jumped into the mind of the boy from somewhere, he knew not where. But the name was famous. No doubt, he was a celebrated fighter; he would have to be before he would be trusted with even the smallest share in the affairs of the famous marshal. But no matter how formidable Tom Campbell, there was Rags waiting yonder in the stable, tossing her head, champing the good, sweet hay, and resting, unconscious of these affairs. She would miss him, he swore to himself with boyish heat. She would a thousand times rather have him than the iron hand and the crushing weight of the marshal!

He shook his head at Hank.

"I'm going!"

Hank snarled with anger.

"Didn't you hear the chief give you marching orders? Come with me, you blockhead!"

"I can't; so long, Hank."

Hank hurried beside him a few great strides.

"Then I'll be outside of town, on the down-river road, at the second turning on the right. Remember! Second turning on the right, and straight up the hill. I'll be waiting there for you, if you ever get that far—which you won't!"

Hank disappeared behind a shed, and the boy went on. Still

he waited for the sound of a commotion within the hotel, but he heard nothing.

No doubt, the marshal had learned at once where his quarry was, or was supposed to be, and he would not be in haste. He would wait for a moment outside the door of the dining room, perhaps, gun in hand, tasting his victory before he threw that door open, prepared to fire.

Like the wind ran Happy Jack.

He jumped a side fence. A taller one of pickets rose before him, but he hurtled over it without losing a stride, and flew on. The thick dust of the street spurted out beneath the fall of his foot, and tossed in a thin cloud above and behind him.

"There goes somebody late for school!" said a yawning, amused bystander.

But Happy Jack merely cursed the looseness of his footing, and rushed on.

He was turning all manner of plans in his mind. He could slip up on the rear of the stable and enter that way—but no, there would be no time for that. Yonder in the hotel the marshal would be swinging into action by this time, at the least, and shortly afterward he would be sure to bear back toward the stable, for he would guess that only the most desperate need would cause the boy to leave town without the mare.

He could not get about the barn, then, and enter with soft craft. Besides, after this violent effort on his part, it would take long minutes before he would be able to control the wheeze and the rasp of his hard breathing.

What approaches were left, then?

The front door of the stable, the back door, or perhaps one of the side windows. He could clamber over the mow, too, but that again involved an endless and hopeless amount of effort.

Where would the guard be then—that famous Tom Campbell?

For his own part, if a man gave him the task of protecting a horse, he would post himself in the actual stall of the animal, and he had no doubt that that was exactly what the other had done. Tom Campbell, then, armed to the teeth, waited in the stall of the gray mare—

And as he reached this point in his conclusions, he shot down the alley and came at the barn itself.

He saw Sim, the liar, sweeping the barn floor with a big stable broom.

Sim looked up with frightened eyes, and then bolted in haste to the side. He was able to guess at danger the instant that he saw its face, it appeared. And the boy, unconsidering, ran straight on with a redoubled speed and shot through the doorway like a hundred-yard dasher making the last effort for the tape. Out of the sun he whirled, and into the shadow of the barn, and saw, thereby, the form of famous Tom Campbell stepping out of the stall!

CHAPTER XX

RIDING HOME WITH HANK

His own gun was already whipped into his hand as he approached the barn door, and it was doubtless that and his speed which had made Sim jump to the side with such haste.

Vaguely, Happy Jack was aware of Sim now, as of a portion of the dark background of a picture, while the stableman flung himself over the high rim of a manger and dropped from view in the safety of its interior. But Sim did not matter; he was not even a footnote on manhood, whereas Tom Campbell was another matter.

He now stepped with one long stride out from the shelter of the stall, his face set—a broad, roundish face, all white about the mouth from the compression of the lips so stiffly. With a brain that worked with hysterical speed, the boy saw these things. And so strongly did nerves and muscle work together in this crisis that he himself felt as light as an unsubstantial shadow.

The long-barreled Colt rose swiftly in the hand of Tom Campbell, and Happy Jack fired as the hand rose.

He saw Tom Campbell duck, as a man will do when a fist goes past his head. It must have been a close call—sufficiently close for Campbell's bullet merely to rip a long splinter from the floor, and then the boy was on him!

The very madness of his attack had saved him. Tom Campbell had been waiting for one of two things—either an idle, sauntering approach, or else a sneaking, cautious one, no doubt. Here, instead, was a flying man who in a single second was through the door and on top of him.

The boy struck with the barrel of the gun, missed, and with his shoulder, and his hurtling weight behind it, crashed into the other. It was not the blow of a fist. It was the blow of a hun-

dred and sixty hard pounds, and that trip-hammer impact it would have been more than human to withstand.

Tom Campbell was knocked against the side of the stall, his wind was flattened from his lungs, and a rib or two crunched. The boy rolled on the floor; and when he whipped onto his hands and knees, gun ready again, he saw that Campbell lay on his face, writhing, gasping, fighting for air like a drowning man.

It was like a miracle. It was like a happening in a dream, except that, in this awakening, all the dream came true.

There lay Campbell, the fighter, totally helpless, his gun glimmering on the floor. The boy picked it up, dropped it into his pocket, and with a grim face he leaned above the prostrate form. Seconds meant much to him, then, and the barrel of the Colt tapped on the skull of the fallen man would end all trouble with him for the time being. Aye, it might crush the skull, also, and make him thereby a murderer!

He caught up a loose rope end and with it he tied the hands of Campbell behind his back, his fingers trembling and stumbling in his haste.

Then he started to work on the mare.

He snatched the saddle off the peg behind her—was there time for that? He jerked up the cinches, clamped a bridle upon her head, and leaving the throatlatch unfastened, he jumped into the saddle, and flattened himself along her back as he rode out.

A loud voice called down the alley: "You, boy—did you hear gun shots here?"

It was the voice of the marshal, and the fugitive did not wait to hear the answer of the unseen youngster in the alley. He was turning the head of the mare toward that back fence which he had noted before and he raised her at it without doubt in his mind. She was worthy of his trust and took the barrier flying, landed in a vegetable garden on the farther side, and galloped on, soared over a hedge of blackberry vines, heaved herself over a board fence beyond, and dropped down into the easy going of a winding alley.

Down this he went and took the first street to the left, and as

he rode, he heard a voice thundering somewhere behind him.

Wild laughter, at that, filled the heart of the boy. That was the great marshal—that was the famous catcher of men, beaten again, and his lieutenant left helpless, and his priceless mare snatched out of his hands once more.

Ah, Marshal William Kinney, this day will be only less black in your mind than one other through which you have lived with agony of spirit!

The second street turned into the main highway that passed through the town, and down this Jack went, not at a racing gallop, but merely at a brisk canter.

The noise and the confusion in the center of the town had brought men to their doors, and their garden gates, wondering what the cause of the two gun shots might be, but they could not connect this cantering but unhurried horse with the cause of the disturbance.

They went on down the street, they crossed the bridge which marked the end of the town, and still there was no roar of hoofs behind to indicate that the pursuit had commenced.

It might be long minutes before the marshal found the right trail, and in the meantime, here was the second turning to the right, up a steep-faced hill.

Down to a walk Jack pulled the good mare, and at a walk they mounted, and so came slowly over the brow, where a little grove of poplars stood trembling in the wind and shivering suddenly to silver, and suddenly to shadow again.

Out of that grove rode the long form of Hank, his legs almost touching the ground, for he rode a strongly made but low horse. His little eyes were opened until they seemed to be all whites, such was his wonder at the sight of the gray mare.

"How in the name of Hector!" cried he.

"I rushed him, and he wasn't looking for that," explained Jack and laughed.

He was filled with laughter. His whole body and soul were quivering with the joy of that action, and the thought of the raging marshal behind him. Hank, at his side, let awe succeed to wonder.

"It don't seem possible," said Hank. "I seen Tom Campbell

take up his post in there. Kinney, he asked me if I wanted a job, too, but I said that I was busy. But—that was Tom Campbell. You said that you rushed him?"

"It took him by surprise. I couldn't think of any other way of tackling him," said the boy. "Where do we ride, Hank?"

"Over the hills and far away," said Hank with a grin. "We'll go where you'll find the finest bunch of gents that you ever laid your eyes on, and the wildest, too. But I reckon that they won't scratch out many of your pin feathers, old son. Not you!"

He chuckled grimly at the thought, and again eyed his companion with admiration.

Then he led the way across the hill-top, and down the farther slope; and through a shallow draw, they climbed to higher ground again on the farther side.

As they did so they could hear the rattling of hoofs upon the bridge, and Hank deliberately drew rein.

"We'd better get on," said the boy, a little anxiously. "Rags ain't as fresh as she might be!"

"Wait a minute," said Hank. "Listen to that!"

The hoofs roared on down the road until the shoulder of the first hill blanketed the sound and made it very dim for a moment.

"They've gone on down the road. They'll go on down it till they come to the first rise, and see the stretch of the plain ahead of 'em. Then they'll see that you ain't there, and they'll have to come back and try for your trail nearer to town. By the time that they get onto it, we'll be gone." He shrugged. "They don't have no luck when they cross the shadder of old Champ. That old boy, he sure knows how to put a curse on the doin's of a man, even a man like Marshal Kinney!"

He added: "They'll do some more yappin' in the papers about this! They'll begin to ride the marshal pretty hard about this. I mean gettin' so close that he had the hoss, and then lost it."

He grinned a little, and then his face darkened. "I wish that he'd break his neck, that Kinney!"

"He ever get you?"

"He got a brother of mine."

"Pen?"

"First a stretch, that was all. But when he come out, he got him again. For nothing that time, by gum!"

"Did he get a fiver?"

"He got a coffin," said Hank through his teeth. He turned and looked savagely behind him. "Kinney'll get along for a while. But one of these days he'll be taking a slug through the middle and lyin' down and beggin' for a drink. Who'll be apt to hand him the canteen then, I ask you? Not me! I'd turn on him like a wolf! Murderer! That's what he is. And maybe he's met up with his match, already! You've trimmed him twice, kid, and you've done it good!"

His eyes burned as he looked at the boy, and Happy Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope not," said he. "I don't mind making a fool of him. But I don't want to have blood on the floor, Hank. Mind you, I'm a peaceful fellow, no matter what the papers write about me, or what people say!"

Hank snarled like an angry dog.

"You're peaceful now. So was I till they started houndin' me. You'll get over that! You'll get over that," he repeated, half under his breath, as one who thinks aloud.

Then he put his horse into a brisk gallop, and the pair swept on over low, rolling country, keeping to the best going always, for Hank seemed to understand every inch of the ground, and how the place could be crossed with the least amount of upgrades and down.

They kept on, their horses falling back to a hand canter and then to the rolling lope of a Western pony, which is less brisk than a trot, but which devours the country endlessly with less strain on the horse and with less hammering of the rider.

The hills fell away.

They crossed a flat stretch, and beyond this arose a low tangle of trees, which were chiefly willows, with big, lumpy heads —sure sign that all this region was under water for at least one part of the year. From a hummock to the left the boy could see

the broad face of the river, brown and shining; and before them, little watercourses and stagnant pools streaked and spotted the woods.

As they drew nearer to this dismal place, the face of Hank brightened, and he waved his hand with an inclusive gesture. "How does it look to you, kid?" he asked, turning then toward the boy.

"It looks like chills and fever," said Jack.

"I'll tell you what it is," said the other. "This here is home sweet home, and don't you mistake it!"

CHAPTER XXI

THERE WAS NO PLACE LIKE IT

Now that they were close at hand, Happy Jack was aware of a thin mist which was constantly rising from the marsh and forming above the tops of the trees. No wind was blowing. The sun fell heavily, like a weight upon his shoulders, and a drowsy sound of many small voices of insects and birds rose from the margins of the marsh, and from the shadows within.

"Could anybody walk up to this place and go in?" asked the boy.

Hank pointed to a few tufts of tall trees which rose above the heads of the low willows.

"Up yonder they got their lookout. We've had a pair of strong glasses drilled on us for a long spell, ever since we come over the ridge, back there, and got into view. They've recognized me. Otherwise they'd be ready to shake a whole can of pepper into our soup for us!"

He grinned at the thought.

"Besides," said Hank, "we don't hardly need guns to keep on watch for us. I'll show you!"

A shallow stretch of water lay at the very edge of the marsh, and riding beside this for a moment, Hank finally found a place that seemed to his liking, and made his horse enter. The animal went with the utmost caution, picking up its feet one by one and putting them down with as much care as though the bottom of the water rested upon eggs. It snorted at the green-scummed surface, and lifted itself out of the water with a snort and climbed the farther bank. The gray mare, profiting by this example, went with almost equal care, and yet, in spite of her daintiness, the boy could feel her feet sinking fetlock-deep in the slimy bottom.

On the bank, Hank halted for a moment.

"Suppose that somebody come sloshin' through without carin' to look—he'd stick so deep that he might get out himself, but he'd never get his hoss free! Luke Harrison stuck a hoss in here, and he had to throw a rope over its head to keep it up, and even then he lost the hoss. It choked on the rope, and he cut the rope and let it go. Somewhere down yonder the mud's digestin' that ol' hoss this minute!"

The boy looked back with disgust at the face of the greenish water, and then they entered the marsh itself.

It was a formidable task to get across it; on either hand many green, winding ways appeared before them, crusted over with scum and moss. And once he saw a spotted snake stretched along the branch of a half-drowned willow with a mouth that looked like a streak of white doeskin. And once he saw something else slip out of a patch of sun into black water.

"Poison?" he asked of his companion, pointing.

By way of answer, Hank recounted: "There was an up-and-comin' young deputy sheriff over in Harbridge. He wanted to come out here and explore, because he suspicioned something, so he up and come. Well, sir, he found tracks, and he follered them along in. He waited for the evenin', and in comin' on, he slipped into the water yonder and got a couple of needle pricks in his leg. He didn't think much of that, and he come on sneakin' along the paths to see what he could see, figgerin' that some harmless little water snake had bit him. But after he'd been hangin' around the place for a while, and had got right up to the shack, and was lyin' there, watchin' and listenin', he begun to get a pain in his head and to turn dizzy, and his heart begin to jump out of his throat.

"He knew what that meant and he come straight in and give himself up and said what had happened. They laid him out and sliced open the snake bite and laid a poultice onto it, and then they poured a lot of whisky into him. He lay around for five days, and he nigh to died the first night, but gradual he pulled through. When he could walk, the chief fixed him up and sent him back to Harbridge."

"He did?" asked the boy, amazed.

"That feller wouldn't talk none," said Hank. "He was a square shooter, and he kept his face shut. Afterward he got a hankering to lead the free life himself, and he joined us."

"Is he with you now?"

"Naw. That was mighty near a year and a half ago, just after I joined up myself. He got into a fracas over in Tuscon, and 'Spider' Jones put more lead into him than he could digest at one sittin'. Mind that dip in the ground there, and take your hoss over it slow and easy. It might give way!"

Over the depression the gray mare stepped like a cat, but the ground quaked and made a deep, sucking sound under her weight. Very glad was Happy Jack to arrive safely on the farther side.

"That's one of the troubles," complained Hank. "The path that's safe one week is nigh drowning you the next. The water's always eatin' into the heart of the ground, one way or another!"

They went on with the sour breath of the marsh always steaming up into their nostrils, and so they came out into a small clearing and the horses trod strong ground again and acknowledged it by stiffening their knees for the first time in many hundred yards.

In the center of this clearing stood a small shack, indifferently built of logs of various sizes and covered over with climbing vines and with moss. It had a romantic effect of peace and even of beauty, but it suggested to the boy, at the same time, a wretched dampness and eternally foul air.

In front of this house were four men, lounging on blankets, as though they dared not trust the moist earth to sit upon. None of them rose when the two rode in, but one or two waved their hands and called lazy greetings.

Hank rode past them and to the rear of the house, where a flimsy horse shed stood, and there they put up their mounts. The place already contained eleven horses, the worst of which might have suited a rich man for a mount in a fashionable park. There was good blood in every one; some looked every whit thoroughbreds.

"When you ride, you ride fast," suggested the boy.

"Aye," said Hank. "But I guess that Rags, there, could manage to keep up her end!"

"Do you know her, too?"

"She's knowed wherever crooks meet and talk; they talk about the marshal, and they're likely to mention his hoss, ain't they?"

The boy nodded. He had never before heard Kinney called "the" marshal, as though the title belonged primarily to him, and afterward to lesser men. And it seemed that the fame of the man-hunter increased the farther one rode from Debney Wells.

He stroked the sleek neck of Rags and looked her over. She was hard as nails from the work which she had been doing in the past month, and though her ribs could be counted, she was not actually weakened by poor condition. A week's rest would be an excellent thing, however.

"Aye," said Hank. "You've taken it out of her. But she's still got it left. Come along and meet the boys."

"The boys" looked over the newcomer with blank eyes until his name was announced by Hank.

"This is Happy Jack Aberdeen that keeps Marshal Kinney awake at nights!"

Their heads tipped up of one accord at that.

He met a lantern-jawed brute of a fellow named "Chuck" Borden, who looked crammed with physical might and free from every decent scruple in action. There was "Missouri Slim," fat as a buttered egg, his face swollen with flesh so that the originally small features were almost lost, and heavily blurred together, and his eyes very nearly disappeared, as will the eyes of a specially plump Poland China pig. "Tiny Tom" was nicknamed as much opposite his real frame as was Slim, for Tiny was a giant of even greater bulk than the great Marshal Kinney. He had a vacant eye, and a cheerful look; he appeared to the boy a half-wit, and such was indeed the case, except that the half-wit now and again flashed into a murderous fury; or else he was performing with perfect exactitude the work which was assigned to him in the most complicated

crimes. His mind, what there was of it, needed to be placed upon a track and given a push. Then it never deviated from the way.

"Sissy" Purchass, the last of the lot, was very effeminate, as his nickname suggested. He had an almost girlish laugh, and girlish gestures. But when his eye crossed the glance of another, his look was as steady as the light which gleams down the barrel of a leveled rifle.

These men one after another gripped the hand of the boy.

"Is he with us?" asked Slim.

"He is for a while," interpreted Hank. "He's with us while his hoss gets fat, ain't you, son?"

Happy Jack nodded. He looked over these faces with a queer, half-frightened interest—not that he was afraid of physical danger from them, but because he could not help wondering if his own life would come to this. He did not need to talk to them to know what they were. They were arrows already feathered and fitted to the string, and they cared not what hand launched them or when!

He regarded them with curiosity, with a sort of horror. One could see in their attitude toward one another, toward life, toward death, that they were that darling of the romancer, of the Western historian, of the newspaper reporter—they were desperadoes in every sense of the word.

For a man may be called desperate to whom life is no more precious, say, than a glass of whisky at the end of a long march in the desert. And these fellows showed their eternal carelessness in their eyes and in their casual words.

When they heard that this was that same youth who had been making a stir in the world lately, through his successful defiance of the famous marshal, they stared at him quietly, with interest, appraising him as one appraises a horse.

But then they settled back, like men who would not change their own favorite mount for any man's racer. He could see that there was nothing about him or his record that would get him a whit more than an even break in the respect of these men. No matter how he stood with the world, he would have to prove himself again in this place.

"Well," said Hank, "sit down, Happy. Whatcha got there, a guitar? Sing something for us, will you?"

"It'll wake up 'Lefty,' " said Sissy.

"You lie," said a hoarse voice from within the house.

"There he is—awake already," said Tiny Tom. "But he's a pile better."

"You lie!" said the same voice from within the house.

"I'm gunna take a look at him. Come along and I'll introduce you. Come along, kid!"

Hank motioned to the boy and led the way into the house.

CHAPTER XXII

MICE AND THE CAT

The interior of the place was all that he could have suspected. It was a litter of saddles, blankets, bridles, and other horse gear along the walls, together with men's clothes, battered overalls, sombreros, ragged coats hanging from the pegs and nails among the horse gear; and on the floor, in the corners, appeared old boots, and rubbish of all sorts. The central floor of the big room had been sprinkled and brushed out—the same sort of care that the most shiftless groom would give to the floor of a stable; and around the wall were spread down the blankets of the men who were occupying the place at the present moment, laid over shocks of hay which had been built up into fairly comfortable beds.

The whole house was little more than this one room. It extended for an amazing distance, and forty men could be slept in it with no particular trouble, as it appeared to Happy Jack Aberdeen. Above his head were the bare rafters, rudely hewn and thick; and here and there they were smudged with the green of moss. For the air inside the house was almost as damp as the air outside. There was a good reason, for in this place men dared not light fires beyond a few that were necessary for cookery. They could not raise white flags of smoke here to betray their hiding place.

In one of the beds nearest to the door was the wounded man. Happy Jack, at that time in his career, was no expert in wounds and sickness; but he needed only a glance to tell him that this man was on the verge of death.

His face had the color of a fainting or a dying man's—sallow white. His lips were steadily compressed to endure the pain which kept a spark in his eyes constantly. His face was thin, the strange, flabby thinness of a man who has lost much blood.

There were two dark stains upon his blanket at the upper edge, and the boy did not need to be told what they were.

"Hullo, Lefty," said Hank.

The wounded man stared at him and made no answer.

"I've brought in a new man," said Hank. "This is—"

"I heard," said Lefty, without turning his eyes to the boy.

"Want a drink, old pal?" said Hank. "Shot of redeye?"

Lefty sneered. "I ain't that far gone," said he, "that I want to hurry myself. Gimme a chunk of pone, though."

Hank hurried to the farthest corner, where the stove stood amid an indescribable litter of tins, and a smell of stale food. He came back at once with a great, cold, greasy slab of cornbread.

"It's a dang good thing when you got an appetite," ventured Hank.

The wounded man shook his head very slightly.

"I got no appetite," said he, "but I'm gunna eat to make new blood."

"Good for you, old son! You do that! You're gunna pull through as slick as a whistle, Lefty."

"I got one chance in three. But I'm gunna win on that chance," said Lefty.

He tore at the bread and began to masticate a great mouthful. His eyes, all the while, remained fixed upon the face of Hank.

When he had swallowed he said: "Nobody got that son of a gun yet?"

"You mean Bridewell?"

"That's who I mean."

"No. He's still runnin' around. But we'll snag him pretty soon, and you can bet on that!"

"I'll take on the skunk that scrags Bridewell," declared Lefty. "What'm I lyin' here and fightin' death for? Because life is such a sweet song to me? Heck, no! I'm livin' to get that dog, and I'll do it, Hank!"

"You will," said Hank with the heartiest admiration. "You will, all right. We're all betting on you, Lefty."

"You lie," said Lefty. "You're the only one of the bunch

that's fool enough to give a dang. Now go on and get out of here. Hold on! Put that canteen of water nearer to my hand. That's right."

He went on eating the cornbread, forcing down the food with snarling lips of the uttermost disgust, and Hank went out from the room with the boy.

"That Lefty, he's dead game," said he.

"He seems that way," said the boy.

"Bridewell got him when his head was turned and dropped him. And then he stood off and sunk four more slugs through him. He thought Lefty was dead. But Lefty wouldn't die. He says that he wouldn't've cared about dyin' if he'd been dropped in a fair stand-off fight, but since it was crooked, he's gunna get the sucker that did it, and no mistake. He won't die though. He'd ought to have died about ten days ago."

They rejoined the group as Tiny Tom picked up some pebbles. He held up his closed fist.

"What I got? Odd or even?" said Tom.

"You got it odd," said Sissy.

"You lie!"

"I got five dollars that says it's odd."

"Listen!" said Tiny Tom with a grunt of disgust, "he's gettin' to be a growed-up man. He's gunna bet all of five dollars in one place!"

"Who's talkin' of dollars?" said Sissy promptly. "Hundreds is what I meant to say."

"Five hundred," said Tom. "Put up or shut up!"

He reached into his pocket, drew out a wallet, and threw it to Hank.

Hank, opening it, took out a thick sheaf of bills and counted the necessary sum. He accepted a similar amount from Sissy, and then the giant opened his hand. There were eleven pebbles in it, and the money went to Sissy.

"I'll give you a chance to get back," said Sissy.

"I don't want a chance to get back," said Tiny Tom. "I was just curious about them pebbles. Now I know!"

He yawned and looked off through the thin mist which shone above the trees.

"We're gunna get the chills and fever if we set here much longer," said he.

"Let 'em come," said Chuck Borden. "What difference does it make to us? Better to lie easy and have a few chills and fever than it is to hoof around outside, unless we got a job on hand. Why don't old Champ turn up?"

"He's gunna come out to-night," said Hank.

"Got any ideas?"

"Ever know him to be without? Sure he's got some idea."

"How big?"

"Enough to choke a cow," said Hank. "He didn't tell me what—just that it was a heap of money."

"Is this kid going in with us?"

"Champ wants him. The kid is gunna look us over and see if he likes the size of our hats!"

Tiny Tom turned his bold, unwinking eye upon the boy and looked him over with the greatest care.

"Maybe the kid's the mouse that's gunna lead the cat in on us," said he.

"What you mean?" asked Hank.

"He's got the marshal after him, ain't he?"

"Sure."

"Well, do we want the marshal in here with us?"

"He ain't got wings," said Hank carelessly.

"He's got a nose like a fox. He could smell his own way along," declared Tiny Tom. "What about poker?"

All afternoon they sat and played cards.

And the boy listened a little to their talk, refused a hand, and then wandered off through the trees.

He was disenchanted with everything that he saw. These were the products of utter freedom. This was their life, these their amusements. And he swore to himself that he would get back inside the fold and rejoin the men of the law when he could.

But there was the marshal riding down his trail with a ceaseless malevolence.

Suddenly he felt both rage and fear coming over him.

How Kinney had been able to trace him with such accuracy, he could not imagine. Oh, perhaps, it was sheer greatness of

intuition that had enabled the big man to strike south to Harbridge and there cast about for his quarry. It was almost like the skill of a bird of prey, and the boy felt, for a moment, like the mouse which Tiny Tom had called him.

Certain it was that he had no relation to these careless, casual men of guns, and he vowed that they should not draw him into their society.

But the marshal?

In his sudden fury, Happy Jack wished with all his heart that he could face that man, and in this marsh, where the quicksands were ready to swallow dead bodies larger than the body of a man. For the marshal was the one great barrier between him and a return, he felt. He told himself that the wise thing for him to do was to face the marshal, not with a gun, but with a white flag. Or, better still, simply to ride in, uncompelled, and surrender himself to some authority, asking only for a fair trial.

Perhaps they would balance the crimes of saddle stealing—if it could be called that—and jail-breaking—if what the mob had done was his fault—against the virtue of surrendering to the law of his own free will.

The moment that the thought was firm in his mind, he determined that this was the thing for him, the only possible line of right action.

He would sleep in this strange house for the night, and in the morning he would leave the wild brotherhood and ride in, not to Harbridge, but the next town beyond. There he would surrender and let the law take its own course.

He was greatly satisfied with this decision, and rousing himself, he was astonished to find himself looking into a pool of scarlet.

The sun had set while he turned his chances back and forth in his mind, and now the color from the west, soaking down through the trees, had gathered here in one slimy pool and given it a terrible radiance.

He turned his back on it with a shudder and made his way again to the house. The mist was more visible now in the slant light, and it was so thick that it made breathing almost a

distinct effort. The dampness penetrated his lungs, his very veins. And when he came back to the house he saw the gamblers bending close over their cards, silent, fascinated by their fortune. It occurred to him then that he could find a name for them. They were themselves like the chances of the game, and no one could predict their to-morrows; they were as unreasoning as young birds in the air, and as terrible as madmen. He felt as though he himself had been almost mad, and that the sight of these true maniacs had freed him from an obsession.

CHAPTER XXIII

TINY TOM IS SMALL INDEED

With the darkness came Champ Logan.

They could hear a voice cursing in the gloom.

"That's old Champ," said Hank.

"He's stuck in the mud," said one.

"Go pull him out, Hank."

"Dang him, let the mud swaller him," said Hank, "because why should I tire myself out about him?"

Not a soul moved. Presently the curses rose to a climax, and then the grumbling voice drew nearer to them.

Champ Logan came out into the clearing, and stamping into the house, he shook off some of the mud which had clotted on his legs, halfway to the knees.

"You cared a lot what became of me, eh?" said he.

"Set down, Champ," said Tiny Tom. "You don't need to rile yourself no more. Set down and take it easy. We got some bacon and pone and coffee comin' up. What more could a man ask?"

He shrugged his heavy shoulders as he spoke, and Champ looked at him with a frown.

"Ain't it good enough for you, Tiny?" he asked. "What you want me to send out here? Goose livers and humming bird's tongue, or something like that?"

"Aw, shut up," said Tiny Tom. "I ain't crabbing. I been at sea, where you get to know what bad chuck can be!"

They settled around an improvised table and ate, talking loudly, falling into sudden silences.

"What's become of the marshal?" asked Hank.

Champ Logan had paid no attention to Happy Jack, up to this time, but now he looked across the table at him and laughed a little.

"Kinney's pretty near crazy," said he. "He's so crazy that when he come back into town, he went into the hotel and got a room. He locked himself in. One of the boys was up in the haymow after pigeon nests, and he looked through the window and seen the marshal sitting there with his head hanging! I tell you, he was cut to the heart when the kid got away from him to-day!"

Tiny Tom lifted his big head.

"We've heard Hank tell about it," said he, as though he did not care to waste his precious attention on a retelling of the exciting tale. "Pass the butter, will you? Ain't there no butter? Gimme some of that jam, then. This is pretty near as bad as the chuck aboard a good old hooker goin' around the Horn."

Borden looked fairly at Champ Logan. "You mean something special, Champ?" he asked.

"I mean something real special," said Champ Logan. "We all know Kinney, and we know what he's done. There's been a fine lot of the boys done in by that skunk. Why did I pick out Harbridge for headquarters? Why, partly because it was so far away from Kinney's chief hangout."

"A dang good reason," said Tiny Tom, nodding.

"Well," said Champ, "if Kinney don't get his hands on the kid pretty soon—and keep them there—he's gunna go plumb crazy!"

"Is he?" asked Tiny Tom with a new interest.

"Why, he's turned gray already over it!" exclaimed Champ. He added, to Happy Jack:

"Is it straight that you got his girl away from him?"

The boy flushed a little.

"I know nothin' about that," said he stiffly.

"He don't know nothin' about that, him bein' a fine gentleman," sneered Tiny Tom.

Happy Jack leaped to his feet. His legs were spread out braced, and his body inclined a little forward, over the table.

Everything and every form in the room, and the faces and the voices, were blurred in his mind, and one thing remained—the face and the hands of Tiny Tom, who sat just opposite

to him, near Champ Logan. And it seemed to the boy that he was seeing Tiny Tom with a wonderful brilliance, as though the light of the single smoky lamp were, at that instant, reënforced by the glare of a dozen arc lights.

"You've talked down to me twice," said Happy Jack, and his voice felt strange in his throat and strange in his ear. "You've talked down to me twice, you fatheaded, stubble-faced son of a coyote. And now if you want an answer, I'll give it to you. Stand up, you dog—or else move your hands. You hear me? Move your hands!"

Tiny Tom did not stand up. Neither did he move his hands. His eyes burned upon the eyes of the boy, but gradually his color left his cheeks. His very lips lost their tint and became a dull, leaden gray.

Suddenly his eyes dropped. His hand fumbled at a tin cup. He drank from it, and the cup shook and clattered audibly against his teeth.

And the boy stood waiting, hungrily, pantingly at watch, with the song of the tempter ringing in his ears, devouring this crumbling man with his glance, consuming him with rage and hate and a peculiar electric fire which reached across the space between them and fell like a hand upon Tiny Tom.

Under that touch, he could not survive. Finally, he pushed back his chair, rose slowly, his head hanging, and then shambled out of the room. He paused near the door to take down a saddle and a bridle, and then he was gone.

The boy, watching, was bewildered. He could not realize what had happened, until he flashed a new glance about the table and regarded the others; but then he saw that thick beads of perspiration were on the foreheads of the men, and their faces were twisted with distress and with horror, and they all looked down at their plates as though they had been shamed before the world by the fall of a brother.

Then he understood. Tiny Tom had been worse than wounded with a gun. His reputation as a brave man had been trampled underfoot, ground under heel.

And then the boy lowered himself into his chair and sat for

a moment, steadying himself, gripping the edge of the table with both hands. He could realize that the provocation which had been given him had not been great; but what an explosion it had made in him!

The moment before, he had been respecting Tiny Tom, rather in awe of his great size, his big way of betting, his rude casualness in all things. But in half a dozen words that same man had kindled a fire of fury in him and set him beside himself.

Happy Jack had told himself, that evening, that these fellows were madmen, and suddenly he knew that he himself had been mad. That instant he had been mad. The same cold, frightful delight that first had shot through him when he fought with Charlie Lake had possessed him once again, mastering his will and his brain, and making him a slave.

So, confidently, he had stood there, without a gun in his hand, waiting for the other to make the first move; and Tiny Tom had not dared.

Why?

He was a brave man; he would not have failed to face death; but it was simply that there was some almost hypnotic force in the boy which overcame him, as it had overcome Charlie Lake. It was the effect of that electric thrill of madness.

These things, as he gripped the edge of the table, in a sudden darkness of the eye and clearness of the mind, the boy saw and understood. And, first of all, he thanked Heaven that he had not killed again; and second, he asked himself when the tiger would leap out of his soul again and appear before a startled world. And, when the tiger appeared, how would it spring? What would fall under its claws, to be attributed by the world to the sane brain of Jack Aberdeen?

"Well," said Champ Logan slowly, "Tiny's gone, I guess."

No one answered.

"Go call him back," said the boy, rising again. "Go call him back. You need him, and I'm no good to you. I'm not going to join up with you. Besides, I'm sorry that I acted this way. I—I went sort of out of my head, for a moment!"

Still no one spoke.

"Tiny's gone," reiterated Champ. "And a good man was Tiny."

"Sit down, kid," said Hank.

He actually reached out and drew the boy back into a chair, and Happy Jack slumped down into it, feeling a very sick fellow, indeed.

All his good resolutions appeared to him now as things which he would need help to carry through. And where would he gain that help? What friend had he to stand at his side? No, the marshal hounded him through the world, and would drive him into one tight corner after another, among rough men, who would be sure to strike the sparks out of him.

He could not touch his food.

Suddenly, Champ Logan said: "Kid, you ain't done anything so terrible bad. You're all right! Straighten up and take a swig of coffee. I thought that you was gunna eat Tiny raw, for a minute. But that's all right; because you didn't do it, you see! You brace up and eat your supper."

"I'm going outside," said the boy.

He pushed himself up from his chair and went half blindly for the door, and paused there for a moment, leaning against the side of the wall. And, as he did so, he could hear the voice of some one murmuring from the table: "He don't know himself yet. He ain't likely ever to. He'll be bumped off, first!"

Happy Jack stepped hastily out into the darkness. It closed thickly before his face. It surrounded him, almost like water. And he, half strangled, walked slowly up and down, with a staggering step. He looked like a wounded or a drunken man, and wounded indeed he was, and through the brain!

For, continually, he was wishing that he had not been born. And in himself he was recognizing what it is given to a few to recognize in themselves—one born to destroy. And as some burned leaves in the fall of the year, so there was in him an electric heat which consumed men. If their bodies did not fall, their reputations did.

Which was the more awful and complete destruction?

Charlie Lake was dead.

Kinney had lost half of his fame.

And now Tiny Tom would be sneered at by the very children of the streets, and he would go past them with hanging, humble head.

It was sickening to think of; but that man was ruined.

In his staggering course, the boy touched a tree, and he gripped the rough bark with one hand and leaned there. Words like the words of a child came up to his lips, and actually were spoken.

"I wanta be good," said Happy Jack. "I don't want to be a crook. Heaven help me!"

CHAPTER XXIV

WITH RIFLES IN THEIR HANDS

He became aware of what he had said, and he was frightened, for it seemed like the babble of a man losing his mind. Then he wandered up and down among the trees, keeping in a wide circle about the house.

He heard a voice calling for him, after a time, and he went in answer because he recognized the calling of old Champ Logan.

Said Champ: "How you feeling, son? You acted sort of broke up. Are you feelin' better about it?"

"I would have killed him," said the boy, the words breaking from him in a rush. "I would have killed him."

"Or got yourself killed."

"I would've killed him," said Happy Jack. "I could sort of feel him in the palm of my hand, if you know what I mean!"

There was a rag of moon looking dimly through the mist about the marsh, and by this moon the boy could see Champ's face, in part, and make out that he was much moved by this last speech.

"The best plan in the world," said Champ, "is not to worry about milk that ain't been spilled. Would you agree on that?"

"Ah, maybe you're right," said the boy.

He was glad to have Champ there with him. He felt that he could rest upon the years and the experience of Logan; anything was better than being alone.

"I'll stop worrying, and glad enough to do it," said the boy. "But—when the next time comes, the next man won't take water. D'you see?"

"Tiny Tom was never much good—except for fighting, I was going to say. And this night showed him up for yaller! Well—

forget it! Now, I wanted to talk to you about something a dang sight more important, if you'll listen to me."

"Go on, Champ. It's sort of comfortable for me to stand here and listen to you. What you want to say?"

"What's your game?"

"What game do you mean? I got no game."

"What's ahead of you, kid? You must be thinkin' about that!"

"I dunno," said the boy. "Perhaps the best thing would be for me to ride into town and give myself up. Not Harbridge, but some other town, where the marshal wouldn't get any of the credit for the taking of me!"

"Give yourself up?"

"They got nothing on me. Nothing much."

"A killing—stealin'—jail-breakin'—and the like—you call that nothin' much?"

"Those things ain't so very bad, after all," said Happy Jack.

"Why, kid, even if they ain't got much, really, agin' you, they'll find a way to railroad you. Look at the marshal! He's still got influence, even if you've pretty near broke his back. Why, he'd run you up the river for forty year, on a string of charges like that. I know the way that they work those things!"

"Then what shall I do?" asked the boy. "Get out of the country?"

"You'll never find no easier country to live in. You stay here, son! I'll take care of you."

"You mean that you want me in with the crowd?"

"I mean that. Not a common member. I want to keep you out and play you in the big stakes. I got a job comin' off in a week that'll mean big money. Real money. Ten thousand for one share. And I'd give you a share and a half!"

"What sort of a game?" asked the boy.

"Why, a funny-sounding game, but really easy. Where do you think it is? Over in Millerton. That's where it is. Over in Millerton they've got a bank that's pretty nigh sick with the amount of money that's stuffed into its insides. I aim to clean it out and give it a chance to start all over again. And it's dead easy. I've fixed the two guards and the payin' teller. I fixed

'em, though they come high! We're gunna make a daylight raid and walk three or four men into the bank. Another couple will stay outside to hold the hosses and to keep a lookout up and down the street. Now, kid, I'd give you the easiest job—the rear guard. You hold the hosses. What's easier than that? But I want a sure man, with plenty of nerve, there, so's not to leave the other boys in the lurch. They're gunna bring out about a ton of stuff."

His joy at the thought almost choked him. He began to laugh with his excitement of anticipation.

And the boy listened, wondering.

"You'd get about fifteen thousand for that little job," said Champ Logan. "Take after that—if you got tired of the business, you could move then. You'd have something to move on. Take that girl that you got staked up the line—"

"What girl d'you mean?" Jack asked sharply.

"Why, there in Debney Wells—the marshal's girl, I mean!"

He laughed as he said it.

And the boy shook his head. It was more than strange that the whole world should seem to know about Kate Marvel.

"You could step over the line into Mexico, or up to Canada, maybe. And there you could plaster yourself into a fine house and set up in style, and send for the girl to come out to you, and get spliced, and live happy ever after. That's what you could do!"

It sounded an easy thing. The mind of the boy wavered this way and that. That was an excellent solution of the whole difficulty, to be sure, and when it was solved, and when he was established with beautiful Kate Marvel as his wife, what could there be in the world to desire?

So thought the boy, and hesitated, shrewdly tempted. His good resolutions of the moment before began to melt. Then he was overwhelmed with a wave of self-abhorrence, remembering.

"I'm not much account, one side or the other," said the boy. "I'll tell you what, Champ—I'm going to walk around for a while and think things over. I'll let you know in the morning, anyway!"

Champ put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"I'll steer you through, kid," said he. "You trust it to me. You got brains—that's what I respect in you outside of nerve. You got brains, and I can use 'em, and you can use me. Don't you worry about nothin'! You're gunna be my right hand, and I'm gunna be yours."

He said good night, and the boy walked a little distance toward the door of the house; but he could not persuade himself to go in. He was by no means sure of himself; he felt as unbalanced as a top which is losing its motion.

He went back among the willows and resumed his strolling to and fro. Presently the lights went out in the big room. He suddenly thought of Lefty. What of Lefty, with his face turned up to the darkness, bitterly resolute to give death no hold upon his soul and body? He admired the courage of that man, but it made him sick with horror to think of the struggle that the wounded man was enduring, and to think of the casual manner in which he was treated by every one other than tall Hank.

What were the dreams into which the others of that company would fall? Dreams of debauchery, raids, murder, violence, death. No, he never would become such a man as one of these—only, perhaps, for a single day! The wise fellow, Champ Logan, who knew so much—he would take care that everything came out right!

He felt a great warmth about the heart when he thought of Champ. He felt gratitude, and wondered what there was about him that had attracted Champ to him so strongly.

It was not unpleasant, out there in the moonlight. He had grown, in a way, accustomed to the sour breath of the marsh; and the croaking of a thousand frogs now kept a humming through the air, far off and near. The moon, as it rose higher in the sky, shone with greater and greater power, and where he saw the water among the trees, it glimmered with a purer silver. The green of the surface scum was hardly visible.

At last, he yawned with sleepiness and was about to turn toward the house when he heard from the left, in the midst of the marsh, an odd sound—a strong, sucking sound, which puzzled him.

He paused to wonder what it might be. It was as though a

horse had stepped deep in mud and wrenched its hoof free with a mighty effort. Or, for that matter, if a man's foot were lodged deep in mud, would not a similar sound be made in freeing it?

And instantly his nerves were tingling, and his ears were keen with listening.

He remembered big Tiny Tom, at that moment. It was odd that he had not thought of this possibility before; but Tom, enraged, shamed, broken, might well have found out the marshal on this evening, and betrayed to him the secret ways through the marsh.

Still listening, and gliding like a cat, he began to make his way to the right, around the edge of the clearing, keeping well inside the shadow of the trees, and heading for the stable. That would be the vital strategic point, in case there were a surprise attack! Suddenly he paused.

Just opposite him, a form stepped out from the shadows of the trees and looked about the clearing, and it was the man of his thought. It was big Tom, unmistakable from other men by the gigantic breadth of his shoulders.

Indignation at a traitor made the boy reach for his gun, but then he checked himself. What if it were simply that Tom, recovering from the shame of his flight, had determined to come back to the camp, and seek Happy Jack out, and fight out the battle which he had avoided?

That might be an explanation of his appearance; or else simply that he knew of no other place to go for the night! In either case, the boy was willing to pity him.

But now, out of the shadows of the trees, another shadow detached itself and stepped forward. It was almost as huge as the silhouette of Tiny Tom. The shoulders were perhaps not quite so broad, and the form seemed more active.

He knew that figure well enough. It was William Kinney—and his appearance scattered every apology for Tom out of the boy's mind. It was true—Tom was a traitor, and here was the law in the person of Kinney, come to bag the sleeping men like rabbits in a burrow!

However, two men were apt to have their hands full with so

many desperate fighters, no matter how completely successful the surprise might be.

And as he thought that, he saw from the deeps of the willows other forms coming, three in a group, and then another and another, silently appearing on the edge of the moonlight, with rifles in their hands!

CHAPTER XXV

KINNEY AT THEIR HEELS

He had gained a position close beside the house, by this time, and from this point he could quickly circle around it, get to the stable, and escape at once with Rags—unless the marshal gave more attention to her than to the capture of the men. That was not likely. Much as he wanted the mare again, he wanted to capture Jack Aberdeen even more.

So the boy hesitated for half an instant between the temptation to escape and the feeling that he must do his duty even by such recently found friends as Champ Logan and his ruffians.

That hesitation did not last long. He had one swift and sure way of giving the warning, and that was by uttering a long, wailing war whoop, and sending two bullets scattering through the branches above the heads of the men of the law.

They might be brave as heroes, but at this, they whirled with one impulse and dived out of sight among the trees, shouting, cursing; and the big voice of the marshal roaring something which Happy Jack did not understand.

For his part, he felt that he had done enough, and stepping a little deeper into the shadows, he sprinted at full speed for the stable.

The house wakened as he ran, and as some one stepped to the door, a rifleshot from the willows sent the man back with a shout of fear and anger. That told the outlaws where their enemies were, and they could lay their plans accordingly.

This jumped through the mind of the boy as he tore open the stable door and ran to the mare.

He had the saddle dragged over her back when the next man came in, running hard. He was from the house, huddling on his clothes as he went, so that Aberdeen had no doubt about

what the outlaws would do. It was not their intention to stand and fight it out; they were going to run to save their own necks.

He called out softly, simply to identify himself, and at the same time there was a rattle of gunshots from the house and the woods beyond.

Some of them would doubtless head for the stable, led there by Tiny Tom to cut off the retreat. Happy led Rags out the back door, as soon as he had saddle and bridle on her, and then he went back among the trees and waited, because he knew that he was helpless in this man trap. If he tried to ride away, there was hardly a doubt that he would find the quicksands. He would have to wait for expert leadership!

That came almost at once.

He heard other noises of men working furiously in the stable. There were no more gunshots from the house, but all were desperately struggling to get away on horseback. And in a moment a rider shot out from the rear stable door, a rather heavily built man, bent low in the saddle, his hair blowing in the wind of his gallop, for he was bareheaded.

The boy recognized Champ Logan and gladly prepared to ride behind him, because he would be apt to know the best ways from the place. Jack was not the only one who saw the chief, however, for two repeating rifles instantly opened on him from the trees on the left and sent a stream of lead crashing about him through the branches; but he was presently away, riding hard down a winding path, and the boy galloping deer-footed Rags behind him.

He saw Champ, crossing a bar of moonlight, wheel in the saddle and raise a gun, and so he called in haste sharply: "It's me—Aberdeen!"

The gun was lowered; Rags, in another moment, was close at the heels of the fugitive leader; and there she remained until they wound out from the edge of the marsh and pointed away toward the open hills, with good footing just before them, and the last glimmer of the water.

But sparks like the sparks of great fireflies suddenly bloomed on the ridges of the hummocks before them. Here, there, and

there, crouched riflemen fired by the light of the moon into the faces of the pair.

It was suicide to go on. The boy reined in Rags; and Champ Logan, cursing in stammering violence, jerked his own mount about and was again in front, riding harder than ever.

They plunged back into the marsh; before them they could hear scattering shouts, gunfire, and then one wild scream of agony.

Somebody had it! It caused a trickle of ice to flow down the spine of the boy, and he rode Rags anxiously at the heels of Champ Logan.

Champ seemed riding for the very heart of the marsh, keeping to narrow ridges of good ground, or scuffing through shallows of water, twisting this way and that among the trees, so that he seemed to know the marsh by an animal instinct. Then he swung to the right.

Before them the line of trees thinned away to nothing; they were almost in the open again when horse and man disappeared before the eyes of the boy. Rags, planting her feet, skidded to a stop, and Aberdeen saw Champ Logan's horse down at the side of the bank on which they had been riding, and Champ himself half lost in mud beyond!

He struggled, and that one struggle thrust him down to the shoulders in the horrible ooze! One hand remained high above his head, and the moon shone upon his convulsed face; and yet, as he saw death reaching for him, Champ Logan made not a single appeal for help.

There was no hesitation for the boy this time. He uncoiled the rope at his saddle bow and shot the noose true to its mark. It was grappled instantly, and hand over hand Champ pulled himself out of the slime.

His horse, which had managed to drag its hindquarters free of the bog, was waiting. In another moment the leader was in his saddle.

He gave not a word of thanks to Aberdeen.

"Ride like thunder!" was all he said, and set the example by flogging his mount into a full gallop.

One behind the other, they issued from the marsh. The wa-

ters at the verge crashed about them, flinging up in a silver mist far higher than their heads; and then the good, honest soil was beneath the hoofs of the horses, and they were gathering speed up the slope. To the right, a rifleman opened, shouting as he fired, to call his fellows to his aid.

Perhaps it was the shouting that disturbed his aim, for only once the boy heard a waspish sound in the air beside his head —then they were over the first stretch of rolling ground, and the naked country lay black before them, sweeping away in gentle curves.

Still, Champ Logan, though there was no immediate sign of pursuit behind them, rode with a frantic speed, head down, jockeying his horse to get greater results from it, until he had gained a small, open grove of poplars two miles away. There he suddenly drew rein and, from the verge of the trees, they looked back.

Nothing came toward them; the moon, riding white and high, searched every crevice for them, almost as clearly as the sun, and showed no enemy in sight.

Then Champ put out his hand. The boy took it, embarrassed, but Champ's eulogy was not long.

"You're white!" said he, and turned the head of his horse again. Happy Jack rode up beside him, and they conversed as they went along, speaking in voices strangely low, as though they were almost afraid that the air itself might overhear them and record what they had spoken.

"The grand bust has come," said Champ in the most philosophical tone. "I've had my fun, though, and played my game, but now the bust has really come."

"You'll pick up again where you left off," said the boy hopefully.

"I won't," replied Champ. "I'm done."

"It was Tiny Tom," said Jack Aberdeen. "He blew the news and brought the marshal in."

"Was it Kinney?" asked Champ, after keeping silence for a moment, as though from awe.

"It was Kinney."

"Are you sure? Did you see him?"

"I saw him. There's no doubt about it."

"And Tom with him?"

"Aye, Tom was the first one I spotted."

"A good thing if you'd gone all the way with the skunk!" said Champ savagely. "He was too big to be all of him straight! And he wanted to get his teeth into all of us, did he? Lemme tell you, kid, that he'll pay for this night, and it won't be in court."

He gritted his teeth. "But Kinney!" he said. "Kinney beat again!"

"We don't know how many of the others he's caught," suggested Happy Jack.

"He has Lefty, anyway," said Champ Logan, "but what difference would it make to Kinney if he had ten like Lefty—and all the rest of them, too? What difference does it make to him? He wants you and the gray mare. That's what he's hungry for, and that's what the papers are waitin' to hear. But he's missed again!"

He turned in the saddle and stared for a long moment, his head bobbing a little with the walk of the horse.

"You've got the luck, and something more than the luck, kid," said he at last. "I thought that you were a different brand; I see that I was wrong. You're good enough to go straight. Y'understand?"

The boy waited to hear more.

"We'll put you straight, too," said Champ Logan. "You bear up and take it easy. I'm gunna have you in hand, from now on! In the meantime, we've got a good many miles ahead of us! Settle down and ride, old son."

"And the rest of 'em?"

"The rest of 'em don't give a dang about us, do they? They'll all be chewin' their tongue off, tryin' to be the first to turn State's evidence agin' me. Maybe they'll ring you in on the trick, too, and tell a few lies about you. No, son, I've played the old stand at Harbridge for the very last time, and now I'm gunna drift!"

"Where?" asked the boy.

"Gosh knows. North, I suppose. We gotta find roosting

places; and we gotta keep ahead of the marshal, because he's gunna come burnin' and boilin' down our tracks. We ain't through with him yet, son. The fastest hoss in the world can't drop a patient man out of the horizon. You'll find Kinney poppin' up again, because by this time he's sure hungry for your life, kid!"

"Fade off my trail, then," said the boy, "and he'll never bother you."

"Did you fade off my trail, when I was snagged in the mud?" asked the older man crisply. "Don't be a dang fool; I'm gunna show you a way out, or let 'em close the door on my heels!"

CHAPTER XXVI

A TREACHEROUS HOST

THE moon was setting, when they came to a small ranch house among the hills; even the night could not cover its ugly nakedness, and the angle at which the chimney rose suggested that the entire building was tottering to a fall.

Champ Logan went to the barn, and they lighted a lantern which they found there. The mow was almost empty. They could look across to mules on one side of the barn, which also held four horses. They fed their tired mounts, the boy delaying to rub down the strong mare. She had been sadly tried, but she was not yet broken, and there was no tremor in her knees.

Then they went back to the house, just as a man in slippers and shirtsleeves stepped out of the back door with a shotgun leaning in the crook of his left arm.

"Hello, Paul!" said Champ Logan.

"Hey!" said Paul. "I didn't expect you up this way. I thought some skunk was out there raisin' a hoss for himself in my barn! How are you, Champ?"

"Fine as silk. Here's a friend of mine, by name of Happy Jack Aberdeen, that you might've heard of. This is Paul Luger, Jack."

They shook hands all around, and Luger was full of exclamations. His interest in Champ disappeared at once, and he walked beside the boy, eying him largely.

"Don't look like you could do it!" said he. "I mean, don't look like you could stand the marshal on his head, that way. Come on in. Glad to see you, so'll the kid be. He's been talkin' of nothin' but you, since you started to make a fool out of Kinney!"

He led the way into the house; the kitchen fire was roused; they sat down to a few cold scraps of meat and bread, and a

steaming cup of coffee; and still Paul Luger could not keep his excited eyes from the face of the boy. There was a stir in the doorway, and Jack saw a freckle-faced youngster of fifteen standing there, half dressed.

"Hey, kid," said his father, "this is Happy Jack Aberdeen. Shake hands with my boy Jimmy."

They shook hands.

"By gosh," said Jimmy, "you ain't much bigger than I am!"

And Happy Jack was mildly amused. It made him feel old and stale and trite to see the gleaming, admiring eyes of the boy, who was instantly full of questions. He wanted to know, particularly, how the jail had been broken in Debney Wells, and more particularly if it was true that he had snapped the wrist irons that held him with the sheer power of his arms?

"Aye," said Paul Luger, breaking in. "Is that straight, Happy?"

Happy Jack looked at the father in amazement. It was strange enough that even a child should ask such a thing; but here was a grown man willing to believe that his arms were stronger than iron chains!

"I slipped out of 'em," said Happy Jack. "I broke nothing!"

He glanced aside at Champ Logan, expecting to see that worthy smiling at the simplicity of their host; but Logan's eyes were as filled with serious inquiry as the others'. Logan, too, seemed to have heard this myth, and more than half believed it! Then, sleepily, they dragged up the stairs to a room, and there the boy pitched himself headlong on a bed and was instantly asleep. He dreamed that he was lost in a vast pit of darkness, and that some friendly hand dangled a silken thread down to him, and by that thread he was being drawn up, and his body was light as a bubble, and only the strong grip of his hands kept him from floating away to the stars.

Out of the darkness above him appeared a flash, then a dazzling beam of light, and he wakened to find that Champ Logan was leaning over him and shaking him by the shoulder, telling him to wake up. The sun was up, and flung a steady cascade of brilliant light and of blasting heat into the room; he was perspiring; and the blood sang in his ears.

"We're getting a late start, kid," said Champ Logan. "Wake up and get up for breakfast!"

The kitchen was filled with swirls of thin blue smoke constantly rising from the stove, where Paul Luger was frying a stack of flapjacks, and the coffee was already simmering. Jack paused only long enough to plunge his hands and face in water from the pump and came in to eat enormously. Their host moved about the room, in the meantime, chatting.

"What's out the window?" said Champ Logan at last.

"There's a cloud over there," said Paul Luger, "that looks like there might be a change of weather. A good thing for you if there is; a good thing for my cows, too. I could use some clean water in the tanks. Take your time, old son. There ain't any hurry. I've given a good feed of barley to the hosses, and they'll need an hour to settle it comfortable in their bellies. They need the rest, too. Even Rags. It's the first time I even seen her, and I must say that she looks the part. Must be like settin' on the back of a bird!"

"We could stay on till noon," said Champ Logan thoughtfully. "They ain't apt to get on our trail much before then, and it's better to start late with fresh hosses than to start early with fagged ones."

"You never said nothin' truer," said Luger heartily. "Besides, I wanta have a chance to chat with you."

"Where's the kid?"

"He's out workin' the cows, he says. He's more apt to work any coyote that floats around inside of the range of his gun!"

"Nacheral hunter, eh?"

"Nacheral idler, I'd rather say. What kid ain't? This break north of yours, it don't mean that they've tumbled to your game down in Harbridge?"

"What put that in your head?"

"I never seen you burnin' up a trail as fast as this before. Have they made things hot for you at last?"

"I'm done in Harbridge," admitted the chief calmly.

"You are? I thought that they'd never get at you! Outside job, or inside?"

"Inside."

"Anybody I know?"

"Tiny Tom."

"Him? I thought he was one of the best."

"He was all right when he was at the top of the pile. He didn't do so well when he got showed up."

"Who showed him up?"

"Happy Jack, here. Gimme some more coffee, Paul."

He filled a third cup of the black lye and leaned back in his chair comfortably, filled with food, resting, and smoking a rank, thin, black cigar.

"He must've started early," said Champ. "The kid, I mean."

"Why?"

"I never heard nothin'; and after one hour, I sleep lighter than a cat. Where's your wife?"

"Her and me agreed to disagree. She's left."

"That's bad luck."

"That's only the way you look at it. Some might think so. Not me!"

He turned and looked again through the window, and as he did so, Jack Aberdeen saw the face of Champ darken.

"You got plenty of room here, Paul."

"Sure. Plenty of room. Always room for a friend, anyway."

"Where does the kid sleep?"

"Yonder." He pointed to a door.

"That's where you used to keep wood, and stuff like that?"

Champ rose and sauntered casually to the door, and then opened it. He disappeared and came back almost at once.

"Luger!" he barked.

Happy Jack stiffened in his chair, for there was danger in the sound of that voice.

"Hello," said Luger. "What's up?"

"That bed ain't been slept in!"

"Ain't it? Get out, now!" said the father. "What would the kid be doin', sittin' up all the night? We was just about to turn in, when you come. We'd been workin' late on a sick mule, dosin' it. The kid was dead tired—"

"I don't mean that he sat up in his room," said Champ.

"What would he be doin', then?" asked Paul Luger.

"Settin' in a saddle and scooting south as fast as a hoss could leg it, with him aboard!"

Luger stared; and so did Happy Jack, uncertain what this could mean.

"You never been very rich," said Champ to his host. "I reckon that the head money you'd get on me and Happy would be worth your havin', Paul!"

"Head money? Whatcha mean?"

"You rat!" said Champ. "You sent the kid to blow on us. How long ago did he start?"

He had drawn a gun, and at the sight of it, Paul Luger's face blanched. "My gosh, Champ," said he, "what you mean by that? What you mean to try to do? What you accusin' me of?"

"Hold on, Champ," said the boy. "You're jumpin' to conclusions!"

"Look at him, I ask you!" invited Champ. "Look at the yaller face of him! Ain't that guilt that he carries around with him? I've a mind to split his head open for him with a slug of lead! Luger, I will finish you, unless you tell me the straight of it! I'll give you till I count to ten—"

Luger suddenly raised his hands before his face and wilted into a chair. He shook from head to foot.

"It was the kid's idea—he wanted to do it—" said Luger. "I didn't—"

"You sneakin' skunk," said Champ, "hidin' behind the back of a kid—your own boy, at that! What'll we do with this rat, Happy?"

"Pay him what we owe him—and get out of his house," said Happy.

"That what you'd do? I'll leave my mark on him before I get out, and I promise you that! I'm gunna take the hide off of you—"

"Hold on," said Happy, "I can't have that!"

"You can't?"

"Bless you, Aberdeen," said Luger. "You're a man—you're an honest man!"

"Go on ahead, then," commanded Champ, "and help us with the hosses. I won't have you behind, to shoot us in the back!"

Luger, slinking like a beaten dog, went before them down the back steps of the house, and Champ Logan went gloomily behind.

"When you're down, every rat is big enough to try to eat you!" said he.

And he turned to throw an anxious look across the hills; but still they were empty of horsemen.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNWELCOME GUEST

THERE was a thickly packed crowd in front of the windows of the Debney Wells *Bugle*. It was dusk, but the editor had caused a strong light to be placed in the window, so that the three-section blackboard was plainly visible. On the blackboard appeared bulletins written in heavy red chalk. The first one read:

Aberdeen and Logan reported heading for the Schuyler Pass. The marshal is close behind, bringing with him a powerful posse. It is expected that he may be able to crowd the two fugitives into the pass. If so, they may be trapped, for this end of the pass already is blocked with a camp of more than thirty men.

The second bulletin announced:

Reward for the capture of Champ Logan, dead or alive. Discovered to have old death sentence hanging over his head for killing of two men in El Paso. Reward increased by public subscription in Harbridge to five thousand dollars. Further reward of three thousand placed on apprehension of Happy Jack Aberdeen.

The third bulletin had just been written out by the hand of the editor himself, and it declared:

Aberdeen and Champ Logan have been seen entering the Schuyler. The marshal and his men are closing up. They have sent fire signals to the men at this end of the pass. Capture of Happy Jack and his companion expected to be announced hourly.

There was a groan of excitement and of manifest displeasure from the crowd. Their sympathies were all with the men who

ran and not with the hosts who pursued. So is it, nearly always, and the most law-abiding citizen follows with sympathetic interest the career of the meanest bandit; feeling, perhaps, that such a career is the final vindication of true personal liberty, and that the law is not, after all, a wall of impassable iron.

"Capture?" said a puncher in the front rank, who had been waiting hours to read the next bit of news in this exciting man hunt. "Capture? They'll never take Happy alive. He'll be deader'n mud before they ever get hold of him!"

"They'll never get him," said another and younger man. "Old Happy, he's fooled 'em so far, and he'll fool 'em again!"

"He's got himself loaded down with an old man—that Champ Logan," said a third. "Otherwise, he might shake free!"

"There ain't a chance," answered an older voice. "They can dodge the law for a while, but finally the law's gunna get 'em!"

The first bulletin was now erased and there appeared upon it a mere editorial message:

If Happy Jack breaks through the Schuyler Pass, will he come on down to visit his old friends in Debney Wells?

The little crowd cheered.

Suddenly, the second bulletin board was snatched from the window. A moment later it reappeared, covered with almost illegible writing, such had been the haste of the editor's hand. The bulletin now read:

News just telephoned from Granville—

"Why, that's this side of the pass!" said some one.

—that early this afternoon, in the full light of day, Logan and Jack attacked the posse at this end of the Schuyler Pass while they were eating lunch, and broke through the line, shielding themselves from the bullets by stampeding the horses of the possemen, and sweeping away in the herd of animals.

At this, there was a prolonged cheering, and men in the crowd of readers even slapped one another upon the shoulder

and laughed and shouted with joy, as though each had been a race-horse owner, hearing of the news of the victory of a favorite.

Another bulletin board was now hastily scratched upon with the red chalk.

No further news has appeared in the office. But it may be that Logan and Jack are at this moment in the town of—Debney Wells!!!

Another yell greeted the announcement.

And turning in from the dark of the street, a tall horseman halted his horse on the verge of the circle of the light, which most effectually screened him from the eyes of the excited readers of the bulletins.

"We're with Jack if he comes, or if he stays away," said one youngster, in a voice like the crow of a rooster. "And dang that bully Kinney! Here's a fair chance and something more to Jack!"

"And a slow hoss for Kinney!"

They shouted and laughed together, and then, as though satisfied that no further news was likely to be forthcoming that evening, they gradually broke up and went their ways.

It had become a regular institution at the office of the newspaper, this posting of bulletins which told how one citizen of Debney Wells was chasing another up and down the range. The editor was easily capitalizing his position. He could get out two extras a day—single sheets of paper in which the most casual hints at information and the wildest rumors about the chase were expanded under the capable hand of Sam Phelps and made to fill whole columns.

The people of the town did not refuse to buy these extras at ten cents a copy, and Mr. Phelps prayed that the chase might endure forever and a day! Already he was planning an addition to his shop, built solely upon the profits which had accrued to him out of the chase of Happy Jack Aberdeen. There were not only the cash benefits from the sale of the extras, but now he was getting handsome sums from papers all over the country

which could not afford to keep special reporters on this distant job, and were willing to take the long, telegraphed tales of the editor of the *Bugle*.

As the crowd gradually melted, the big man on the big horse turned down the street again, passed the Eagle dance hall, where a large sign announced that there was a dance for that evening, and went slowly on until he came to the alley beside the house of Joe Marvel. There he turned in, went to the barn, and put up his animal. Afterward, he circled to the front of the garden, and paused for a moment outside the garden gate. This, at length, he pushed cautiously open.

Brisk steps came up the walk; the big man stepped aside into the thickest shadow of the trees, and there he waited as a youth turned in at the gate and bounded up the front steps, calling out. Other footfalls pattered down the hall to meet him.

"He's through!" shouted Dick Marvel. "He's busted through the Schuyler Pass. Hurray for Happy Jack! I tell you, everybody's wild about him! You ought to've heard them cheering! You must've heard them, even here!"

Kate Marvel was answering with excited questions.

Then: "Talk lower, Dick! Dad's pretty bad to-night. Have you got any other news?"

"I been all over town," grumbled Dick. "I can't get a job. Mrs. Trueman, she'll give me a dollar a day for two days helpin' her to clean house. That's all that I can raise."

The two went back through the hall, and the eavesdropper moved softly to the back of the house, passed silently onto the rear porch, and finally tapped at the kitchen door.

"Come in!" called the voice of Kate Marvel.

He opened the door. Her back was turned as she bent over the stove.

"Is that you with the milk, Jerry? You're a bad boy to be so late—you'd better tell your mother that—"

The silence made her turn her head, and then she whipped about.

"William!" she cried. And she clutched her apron with both hands and stared at him in fear.

"I'm kind of like a ghost, it appears," said William Kinney. "Give you a mighty bad chill, don't I, Kate?"

Still with her eyes fixed upon him, she slipped to the door of the dining room, and turned the key in the lock.

"What's that for?" he asked. "You afraid that people might find out that I've come to see you, Kate? Am I as bad as all that, I'd like to know?"

"I don't want Dad to hear," she said in a very faint voice. "He might begin to—"

"To hope?" asked Kinney sourly.

She did not answer. She watched him as though she expected a blow from his hand.

"You hate me, Kate, is that it?" he asked her.

She shook her head. She seemed too busy with her eyes to be able to find words.

"You got reason to hate me, though," he admitted. "Because I seen you—that evening with Jack Aberdeen—that was no cause for me to cut you off the way that I did."

She blinked, and swallowed hard.

"That night," said Kinney slowly, bringing out the words one by one, "I was mad. I told you I'd never look at you again. But I said what I didn't know. I been seein' you plumb constant ever since. Kate, no matter what I seen or what I know, I couldn't keep away from you. That's why I've come back here."

He paused. "Can you say something to me, Kate?"

"You—you look pretty tired, William. Won't you sit down?"

He shrugged and smiled.

"Tell me straight. How do things go? Is that the whole of your supper?"

She stepped back a little, hastily, and flushed. It was as though she wished to screen the food which was cooking on the stove.

"No meat, that I can see," said he.

"We're better off when we eat light," said she.

"The doctor tell you that?"

Her wretched eyes dwelt upon him, but she did not speak.

"It ain't good for your father, is it? Didn't the doctor say that he was always to have the best of everything?"

"He—he gets different food," said she.

"If he does, it'll choke him," said Kinney.

Her mouth twitched. "We'll get on," she insisted.

"You're pale. You look five years older, Kate," he told her in his grim way. "And how about him? He ain't so strong, I hear?"

At this she caught her breath hard and managed to say: "What do you want me to tell you, William?"

"I want you to listen. I don't ask you to talk."

He stepped closer, as though he felt that the nearness of his bulk would have an effect in overpowering her. He looked very gray; his face was haggard. No rain had fallen in the town that day, but he had ridden from afar, and his shoulders were dark with the wet.

"First about him. He's still ahead of me, and he's still safe. That's what you want to hear the most, I suppose?"

"You didn't come to tell me that."

"Set down, Kate. Be easy. I got more to say!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

KATE MARVEL'S PLEA

She looked upon the big man with the awe of one who expects pain, but who cannot tell just when and where the blow will fall. But she sat down at his bidding, because her knees were beginning to shake. She had her hands clasped together in her lap, and her whole expression was one of such fear and pain that it made his heart ache. And yet at the same time he never had loved her more, and though there was in him something that terrified her, he swore to himself that, once he could have the good fortune to call her his wife, he would make her life happy!

Therefore, he hesitated a little. He wanted to go at this affair in the best manner, and the gentlest way; but, after all, one who is accustomed to breaking wild horses cannot very well use a light hand upon a park hack.

He said, at last: "I'm gunna tell you your mind, Kate, and when I say something wrong, you up and answer back to me."

She nodded, half hypnotized.

"You don't want me in here, even if you think that you and your dad really need me. You'd rather half starve than to have me here. Particular since you seen young Aberdeen!"

He tried to control his expression; but as he spoke the word, he could not keep his nostrils from flaring.

Then he said: "I'll tell you how it is: You seen him, and he meant a good deal to you, because he was different. Here I am —I'm big, rough, hard to talk to. I ain't got many pleasant ways. There was him, young and easy-goin', and easy for him to get on with girls. He ain't old, but he's had enough experience," said the marshal with bitter significance. "And besides, you was staked out and allotted to me. You was my woman, and you belonged to me; and girls and boys is all alike. What they

gotta have, they hate, and the chair that they gotta sit still in, is the hardest one in the room!"

He paused to see how his speech was affecting her, but she had not altered, except, perhaps, to grow a little more tense.

"Anyway," said he, "the fact is that you seen him, and you liked him, and when he talked soft to you, you couldn't help but believe him, the same as other girls have done before you! And when that happened, and I seen it—well, it drove me wild, and I talked pretty hard on you—"

He paused again, remembering with a touch of shame the brutality of his outbreak upon that other day.

"Away I go on the trail of young Aberdeen, and everybody reads about it and everybody hopes that he'll get away. Why? Because he's young, and I ain't so young. Because he's good lookin', and nature didn't give me that kind of a face. Because he's a new one, and because they're tired of havin' me catch the men that I start out after. But whether they're tired or not," he added fiercely, "I'm gunna succeed again, and put him back in a safer jail than this one here in Debney Wells, that he could talk his way out of!"

Her shoulders raised a little as she took a big breath. Then she waited for him to go on, and he said:

"Everyday, you been hearin' the tales of what he's done. Lies, mostly, and those that are true, all stretched. And every day, you been hatin' me and likin' him the better and wishin' that I'd fall and break my neck—"

"I never wished a harm to you—" she said. It was true, and that truth enabled her to speak.

"You wished me dead," he insisted, "so long as he could be plumb safe. Well, he ain't gunna be safe. If I was to let down, which I won't, he'd still come to no good. He never could settle down with you. He never could make you a husband. He never could take care of children for you. He'd leave you here to starve and die, and you would have to do that, because he ain't gunna have enough to keep himself from starvin'. And if he does have anything, it'll be stolen money. Would you like to live on that? Stolen money? For you and your kids to be raised up on?"

She closed her eyes.

"If I go down," he insisted, "there's others to take my place. He's laughed at me. That don't matter. But he's laughed at the law, and the law'll never stop workin' until it has its fingers—in his throat!"

He saw that he had said too much and that she was half fainting, but he could not help rushing on and saying: "Well, Kate, you gotta make a decision. If I was a proud man, I'd never come near to you again. But I ain't proud. I throw my pride over my shoulder. To stand here and look at you, it melts my heart like a candle flame eats wax. I'm ate up inside the same way by lookin' at your pretty face, Kate. Now, I say that I'd go down on my knees on the floor, if you wanted me to. And I'd tell you that I love you, the way that the handsome lads do in story pictures. I'd do that, and more. I want you that bad! Kate, if I can have you, you write your own ticket!"

To make this surrender was to him such a vast thing that the veins stood out on his forehead, and his breast heaved, and his breathing could be heard, harsh and rough, like the breathing of a horse which is pulling a load up a hill. She found it very hard to face him; and she could not make her eyes cling to his face for more than a moment.

Then she saw that she would have to speak, for such a speech as this could not remain unanswered. He had spoken, in the end, only of his love for her, and the death of his pride, and this to her was a revelation. It made her fear him less, but, strangely, it filled her with a sense of horror. It was a thing to be heard, but not to be imagined. It was such a thing as the world would never have believed, but would have shrugged its shoulders and said that Marshal Kinney, at least, never could sink beneath himself.

But he had. He was a different creature, and a man in mortal agony, so much so that with the sense of horror, there was another of pity in her.

She looked earnestly into his face, now, and she was almost on the point of going to him to rub the deep wrinkles of pain out of his forehead. She wanted to soothe him, as the nurse at the bedside wants to soothe a delirious man. But she dared not

touch him, or speak to him tenderly, because if she did, she knew that his hands would be set upon her and almost crush her, and that she would be lost in the power of his enormous, straining arms.

Now these thoughts engulfed the girl. She looked to the ceiling, and saw a jagged crack upon it; and she looked to the floor, and noted how hard heels and nails and scrubbing had whitened the wood and worn it deeply away, in some places half the thickness of the flooring. She noted these details automatically, and all the while she was begging, silently, for some kind of help and advice.

In the end, he had not stressed what he would do for her father. But she could think of little else than the crippled man sitting up in his bed, with the big, woman's shawl drawn around his shoulders. He never complained, and his eyes had a dreadful way of following her about the room.

Well, it would be life for her father, of course. She knew that. Money meant better food, plenty of it—and no fear of the future. And she could not help remembering that earlier and happier day when he had been a cripple, to be sure, but a wonderful cripple, able to swing himself about on his crutches and catch his children in their games. Sometimes he would fall from his crutches, but he always landed on his hands and saved himself. He had a mighty strength in those arms.

Once he had said to her: "I'm gunna give you anything that you want in the world, my little beauty. I'm gunna tear open the heart of a mountain, if it's got anything inside that you want!"

And he had showed her a hand, as he spoke, and she had admired and wondered at the bent, crooked, massive fingers.

That very hand had been ruined not a fortnight later—and now he was this broken man! She knew that he was no longer a hero. He had been the bravest man in the world while he had two hands. Now he was weak; he was filled with fear.

She thought of these things and the weight of them—her sorrow for that sick man; and her pity and fear of big Kinney; and her grief for herself—the weight of these things almost broke her down to tears.

She shook her head, and somehow that cleared her thoughts a little, and enabled her to draw the breath that gave her another moment of self-control.

"Well," she said at last, "I suppose that you've thought over everything."

He nodded. But though he did not speak, his lips twisted hard, and she saw that he wanted to burst out into another emotional appeal, but would not allow himself that liberty.

"I dunno that ever I'd love you, William," said she.

He breathed. He merely said: "Time—that'll do the right thing by us both."

"I dunno—" and her voice sank small and thin: "I dunno that I have a right to keep myself from you. I gotta be truthful, now, and tell you that it's mostly for Dad."

"Ah," said he, "what do I care what reason it's for? I care for you, not why you come to me. But once I have you, I'm gunna show you—I ain't one that can show any girl his heart—but I can show a wife—I can make you happy!"

Those vast hands, how they had fascinated her in their clumsy gestures, until the slender, graceful hands of Happy Jack Aberdeen—

"And—and—suppose that ever Jack Aberdeen came by—my eyes would maybe follow him, because I love him!"

"You think you do. He really ain't nothin' to you!"

"Oh, I love him," said she. "Oh, William, I love him terribly hard and strong!"

"Do you?" said he.

"Yes. I do!"

"Well," said he, "them that are gone'll one day be forgotten."

At that thought, so brutally put, she rose from her chair, and her face whitened, and she cried out to him in a shrill burst of pain:

"William, he must be saved, d'you hear? He must be saved! He must not die! That'd kill me, too! That'd surely kill me! Oh, William, you must say that he won't die!"

The marshal lifted a clenched hand as though he were about to curse the girl and her lover in one breath—almost as if he

would strike her; but she came to him with her arms out, and he knew those arms were stretched out not to him but to the thought of her lover; and somehow that made him see that life without her would be like death. So he said nothing, and she cried again:

"If you'll save him, he'll soon forget me. And then you can have me for your wife, William. I'll be a true wife to you, I swear; and if he's alive and happy, I can stand it, somehow, and try to make you happy!"

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO GIVE THEIR WORD

If this proposal had been studiously framed, it could not have been stated in a way more offensive to William Kinney, for there was now linked in one thought his own marriage with the girl he wanted, and the safety of the man whom he most hated. For the power of his resentment against Jack Aberdeen had grown and grown until now it almost ruled his soul.

He said hoarsely: "What could I do, honey? Suppose I was to stay off the trail—suppose I was to let the people talk as they pleased and say that I was beat and afraid to keep on after him, still what good would that do? I ain't the only one after him. The rest won't forget him and his ways. And he's sure to go down."

"Not if you were to help him!" said the girl impulsively. "The two of you could deal with the whole world, I think!"

"Help him?" echoed the big man heavily.

"Yes, yes! You could show him some safe way to escape."

"I've got an oath sworn to my State!" said the marshal. "Would you want me to lay that down?"

She twisted her hands together and her face was pale with emotion, and dark with thought.

"You've taken so many, William. Every one knows what you've done."

"They know more about this one thing that I've missed out on than they do about all the places where I won! Ask any child or any old man all along the range, and they can tell you every step that I've taken after him, and every one where I've failed! They know that. They laugh when they think about it. I've heard 'em laugh!"

"Don't you see?" said the girl. "They'll soon forget. You've done a thousand famous things, and you'll do more—and poor

Jack Aberdeen will be gone out of the country long before we—"

"D'you think that he'd leave?"

She stared, confronted by this possibility.

"D'you think that he'd go, honey?" asked William Kinney. "I tell you, you don't know him. This business is honey and milk, to him. He loves it and he lives on it, ridin' stolen hosses and livin' on stolen—"

"He won your horse on a fair bet, William!"

He looked down at the fire in her eyes and sighed.

"Well," said he, "let it go, then. But I say that he'll never leave. He'll never leave you. Not that he cares about you—except that he knows that I do. He's livin' his days on the strength of what misery he can make for me!"

Then he added: "He'll come back here to see you again, not that he cares a rap about seein' you—"

"D'you know enough to say that?" she asked.

"Had he ever looked twice at you before the night that he busted loose out of jail?" he asked angrily, his pride taking the upper hand.

She was silent, her glance wandering toward a corner of the room as she tried to remember all the moments in her life when she had seen Happy Jack, cantering up the street on his horse, wandering with his laughing friends through the streets of the town, or guitar in hand at dances. There might be a great deal of truth in what the marshal had said. She could not remember that, in those days, he had paid her any special attention. So when he came to her door and told her that he loved her, it had been half the joy and half the shock of the surprise that had overcome her.

Said Kinney: "But when he wanted to hurt me, he thought of you, and he came to steal you—and he found it an easy enough job!" he added in bitterness.

"I can do one thing," said the girl. "If he should come again, I'll ask him to go away—I'll even say that I don't want to see him again. Yes, I could do that!"

She was grim with the mere thought of that effort, and the marshal, studying her, dwelling in cruel fondness upon her

face, realized for the first time how deeply she loved the boy. What would not he himself have given for one tithe of that same fondness?

"If you do that," he brought out the words sharply, "then he's free to go. I'll do the rest. I'll block the hunt that starts after him. I'll see that they never get near to him. I'll do that! Only—the old crook that's with him—Champ Logan. You got no fondness for him, I suppose?"

She hesitated. "Is he the friend of—or—"

"He's a crook," said the marshal with vehemence.

"I'm asking only for Jack Aberdeen," she admitted.

He held out his hand. "Do we shake on this?" said he.

"We make it a contract, if we do that?" said she.

"Aye, between you and me, faster than all the papers of all of the lawyers, and faster than all of the seals of all of the notaries, if we're honest folks!"

He saw her hesitating as though on the brink of a cliff. Then, her face a little averted, set with resolution, she put out her hand. All that was manly and generous in him urged him not to take it; but all that loved her rushed up and mastered his better impulse.

Their hands closed in that pledge, she to take the man she did not love; he to surrender what had been far dearer to him than his life—his spotless honor, and his high fame among men!

But the thing was done, at a touch; and their hands fell lifelessly away from each other. And each was thinking not of what he had gained, but of what was lost forever.

"Well," he said suddenly, "you'd better let 'em know that I'm here."

She sighed. "Yes," she said, "I'd better."

She unlocked the dining-room door. There still seemed to be time to hold back, but her eyes fell upon the big holsters on his thighs supporting the two Colts which were the keys with which he unlocked the doors of life and death.

Let it be life for Happy Jack Aberdeen!

She set the door wide and went before him. At the door of her father's room she paused and looked in.

"Dad!" she cried, and the marshal wondered at the joyousness which she was able to put into the tones. "Dad, what d'you think?"

"I been hearin' some noise up the street. What's up?" he asked in a lifeless voice.

"William is back."

The marshal heard the sudden stir of bedclothes.

"Does that make you at all glad, honey?"

"He's here," she said.

"William—Kinney?" cried the father.

"He's here, and—we've made everything up again!"

"Hey! Kate!"

She stepped back through the doorway.

"Hey, Kate, come in and tell me true what—"

"William will tell you all about it. You talk to him, William. I've—I've got to finish cooking dinner."

Her voice was gay enough, still, but the marshal saw the gleam of tears, running swiftly down her face, and the sight sent a thrust as of cold steel through his heart.

Yet he walked on into the room and took the uncrippled hand of the miner. With startled hope, Joe Marvel looked up to him.

"It ain't really true, Kinney? Aye, it is true, or you most surely wouldn't be here."

His head sank back on his pillow and he looked suddenly white as death, with closed eyes.

"It's true," said the marshal.

"Well," said the other, "I wonder how it come about—I wonder how it come about!"

And he opened his eyes and smiled, and the light of returning life was in his glance.

Young Dick, hearing the heavy voice, came hastily in. He started at the sight of the marshal, gasped, and hardly had presence of mind enough to shake hands.

"Are you back?" he muttered.

"I'm back, son," said the marshal. "You won't have to get that dollar-a-day job!"

He regretted that remark, at once, seeing the eyes of the boy

narrow suspiciously; but as Dick left the room, he sat down at the bedside of the cripple. That was his place, for the time being, as he well knew; and except for his hold upon the father of the family, he had a small grip, indeed. Unless that contract to which she had given her hand really was binding with her!

He doubted that. Not that he doubted her, but because he had small trust in the ultimate good faith of any woman.

Dick, in the meantime, had hurried out of the room.

In the hallway, he paused for a moment, listening to the voices which began in the next room—his father, speaking eagerly, almost greedily, with a note in his voice which the boy had not heard there for weeks—a note of hope, of living strength. And to the words of the father, the marshal's heavy boom responded rhythmically, in short sentences.

The boy was filled with doubt.

He went to the kitchen door. It was locked, and when he called, his sister answered cheerily enough that he was not to come in, as yet—she was preparing a surprise for the dinner.

He stepped back with a grin. That was a girl's way—and what more likely than that she should be making a surprise for the meal, if the man of her heart had come back to her? But was this man really her choice? Was that what it meant? He shook his head, unable to determine, and desperately anxious.

Then, following another thought, he wandered around to the kitchen door that opened upon the back porch, and opening it very softly, he stole down the porch until he had come to the kitchen window. This was partially misted over, within and without, and when he stared through, he could only distinguish the dim outline of the girl, opening the oven door.

He rubbed the outer side of the glass and in this manner freed his vision greatly, and so doing, he was able to see her face more clearly.

He stared hard. Still, it was not a perfect vision, but suddenly she came to the table beneath the window, and then he could see distinctly the redness of her eyes, and the tears wet upon her face.

Dick Marvel retreated as softly as he had come, and gripping the nearest pillar of the veranda, he waited for his brain to

clear. He felt that he could understand. She had sold herself, for him, for his father. And what could he do about it? He thought of the big form of the marshal; and he felt the weakness in his own, slender hands, but there was a rising anger in the boy's mind.

CHAPTER XXX

A MERRY DANCE

THERE is nothing that makes a dance more cheerful than a good common topic for talk, and that evening in Debney Wells the dancers had two things to talk about—the long chase of Happy Jack Aberdeen, and the return of the marshal of the town. It was fully two months or more since Jack Aberdeen broke from the jail at Debney Wells, and during that time all eyes in the town had been turned after him, and now it was felt that he must be close at hand—the marshal already was among them, and a rumor said that he had gone to the house of Joe Marvel!

That was a third theme which set all the tongues of the girls wagging, and filled the air with a hundred conjectures, for if the marshal were really in that house, did it not mean that he and beautiful Kate Marvel were reconciled after that spectacular disagreement which had made all the town gasp and then laugh to hear of it?

Now all these speculations were stirred up in murmurs, and the dance was proceeding with a fine, brisk gayety. Every "girl" in the big room, from fifteen to fifty, was busily dancing; for dances at Debney Wells always drew an excess supply of lean, brown-faced young men who rode in for the evening from the neighboring ranches. When every girl was taken, still some of them were sure to be grouped here and there, watching keenly; and there were others gathered in the hall outside, at the head of the stairs. There they smoked, and watched late arrivals at the dance, and chatted in deep voices.

Presently they fell into a sudden silence; they stared down the long flight of stairs which led up from the street; and then one or two of them hastened into the dance room just as a

schottische ended, some couples prolonging the last whirl, and others already on their way to their chairs.

The men from the hall passed the whisper, and instantly it spread across the room.

It made even the most tired forget their chairs; every face turned to the door; there was one deep, prolonged murmur, and then a total silence; the musicians stood up on their platform, agape, and looked in the same direction; and for a moment there was so little sound in that big room that one could hear the wind which entered the row of windows and rustled the skirts of the women.

So deep was that silence that every one distinctly heard a heavy footfall pass from the hall into the cloak room, and then in the doorway appeared the vast shoulders of Marshal William Kinney, and at his side Kate Marvel.

The rumor had been true, then!

An audible gasp went through that room, but not a word was said aloud. The women looked at one another, and the men looked at the floor or the ceiling. So completely did the presence of the marshal awe them all.

For he carried the sense of his dignity and of his historic past with him. He never had seemed so tall, so huge, so mighty of mind and of hand.

It was true that he had not succeeded in his last great effort, but people were beginning to discount this failure a good deal. Happy Jack Aberdeen was said to be a veritable will-o'-the-wisp, and it was no shame to the marshal that he had been foiled.

The hungry eyes of gossip were instantly fed.

They saw that his hair had indeed, as rumor already had warned them, turned very gray. It actually was a fluff of silver at either temple! And this changed him and gave him a much aged and more reverend appearance. It trebled the impressiveness of his coming.

They began to whisper together at once, of course; the women with one another, and the men aside. They reminded one another that the great marshal had given up his ranch to a foreman, and it was said that affairs on his place were going from bad to worse. Here was the silver hair to show the agony

which his spirit had endured. And in considering all these things, suddenly Debney Wells decided not to smile at its great man any longer. If he had been too proud, he had paid a penalty for it!

It was obvious that he was attending his first dance not to actually take part in the fun, but simply to let the town see at once that he was back on his old footing with Kate Marvel, and this was a crowning wonder. The girl held herself proudly; and her friends thought her a little pale; but presently she was whirling about in a dance, and the color returned, and it was said that she was as gay and as smiling as ever. The marshal, on the other hand, was soon surrounded by a little group of men, who talked seriously with him—but not about the chase of the wild Jack Aberdeen.

They spoke of other things, and there was much to be commented upon—particularly that raid upon the marshes which had left three celebrated criminals in the hands of the marshal and his men. That had been worth the long trip south. He had gone down there to wake them up, laughed the men of Debney Wells. He had shown them how a different breed of men could do things in a different way!

The marshal accepted this applause, and began to breathe more easily. It had been hard for him to come to this dance hall under the eyes of the citizens. He knew a part of what they would say, and he was well aware that he would be openly accused of having paid a price to get back Kate Marvel, and that she would be blamed for making herself an article of commerce, as it were. But now he found the old maxim true—that the best way to stand against fire of the enemy is to strike at its root. He was able to look these people in the face without difficulty after the first few moments.

In the swirl of a tag dance, there was a new arrival, almost unmarked.

He was a handsome young fellow of apparent Mexican blood, for his skin was swarthy, and his hair very long and very black. He wore a short black mustache as well, and sideburns that gave him an old-fashioned appearance. In his gay Mexican clothes, the brilliant sash of blue silk about his waist, the silver

work upon his jacket, he made the most colorful spot in the crowd; and stepping in quickly, he tagged the partner of red-headed Maisie Jones, a belle of the town.

She accepted him with a smile, and they whirled off through the crowd. Instantly they were pursued. The men on the edges of the crowd were keen as hawks in the pursuit of this jolly girl, but though they constantly swooped, somehow they always missed; and she began to look up at her partner with wonder, and to laugh.

However, Fate could not be avoided. Suddenly they were cornered, and a hand succeeded in touching the arm of the stranger. He turned to the successful hunter with a smile.

"Look here, partner," said he, "let me keep on dancing, will you? I've only got a short time here. I'm Jack Aberdeen."

The rangy cow-puncher, staring bewildered, suddenly made out that the eyes of this swarthy Mexican were a keen, bold blue; and he stepped back with a gasp.

"Jack—you're sure wild!" said he. "There's the marshal in the corner!"

"I know it," said Jack Aberdeen. "But you be a good fellow and don't tell him, will you?"

And off he danced with the red-headed Maisie Jones. She, bewildered and enchanted, stared at him.

"They'll certainly think I'm a spook if you keep lookin' at me like that," said he.

"Jack, what got you here? Have you been drinking overtime?"

"I thought about you, Maisie, and I couldn't keep away. What brought the marshal here?"

"Kate Marvel. He came with her." She scanned his face sharply, but he only nodded.

"I suppose they're friends ag'in, then," said he.

"Of course! Jack, you'd better dance at this end of the room."

"He'll never see me. He's thinkin' of something else, for a wonder."

"Good heavens!" said the girl. "Every one will know! See people whispering?"

"They won't tell him, though. They won't tell the marshal. And that's the point of the joke, Maisie!"

She stared at him with a flash of bewildered joy.

"Is that it, Happy?" she demanded. "Are you making a joke out of this?"

"I haven't come to rob the girls and boys of Debney Wells," chuckled Aberdeen.

She gasped. "If he learns that you've been here—"

"And that everybody on the dance floor knew who I was," he put in.

"Poor Mr. Kinney! He'll about go mad!"

Happy Jack turned his head a little, and as they whirled past the marshal, he looked him straight in the face; and it seemed to him that Kinney started a little with the shock of looking into those blue eyes.

Then, as though recovering from a mere fiction of the mind, the big man slowly shook his head. Happy Jack laughed, and the daring spirit in him laughed also.

For he saw in the gray hair and the altered face of the marshal his own handwriting. That was what he himself had done to the man hunter, and all the long rides, and the cold nights, and the burning heat of the day which he had endured, were now repaid. And he felt, in a way, like a child which labors at some great stone on the edge of a cliff, undermining it, prying at it with a lever, toppling it on the verge, and seeing that the great fall is soon to come.

"There's Kate Marvel," suggested the red-headed girl, with a touch of malice. "She's here with Mr. Kinney, you know."

"I'll ask her how she likes him," said Happy Jack, and the next moment he allowed himself to be tagged, relinquished Maisie, and watched the instant chatter which she began with her partner.

The room was learning rapidly what had happened, and who had come into it; and as the dancers spun past him, the boy felt the pull of their eyes upon him. Being made conspicuous, he was instantly placed in vital danger from the marshal, but he trusted that Kinney would attribute that attention to the gay

costume of the "Mexican." For that very purpose he had donned this outfit and left its owner tied to a sapling not many miles away.

Kate Marvel came toward him, flushed and laughing with the dance, a trail of gallants drifting after her, eager to tag. She, at least, had heard nothing, and young Jack Aberdeen looked at her and saw, in spite of her beauty, only another chance to strike a blow at Kinney.

He stepped gracefully through the tangle of dancers, tagged the girl's partner, and instantly received her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXI

KATE TURNS COLD

He said not a word; he did not need to, for hardly had they swung away in the dance before he saw her smile vanish, and the color was struck from her face. She swayed and lost the time. And he, steadying her strongly, said at her ear:

"I had to see you again, Kate. I had to come in spite of him to see you. You're with him again. I suppose I know what that means. But I had to see you and talk to you, and ask you why you've gone back to him!"

She had regained control of herself; she could even make her eyes meet his.

"There was nothing else to do," said she.

"You stopped caring about me, Kate?"

She looked straight at him.

"Yes," said she.

The pride, the easy self-assurance of Happy Jack Aberdeen, was shocked rudely. He looked back at her eagerly, trying to break through the calmness of her eyes and get more deeply at the truth that might lie behind them, but he failed. She was steady as a rock.

"You'll be flying about the world like a bird," she said. "William won't."

"Except to chase the bird?" he suggested.

"He's given up that chase."

He leaped at a conclusion at once.

"I know what that means, Kate. You've bought him off for me, and paid with yourself!"

"Do you think that?" she said.

And her quiet tumbled the lordly vanity of the boy about his ears with a shock. What did he know of her, after all? He had thought that she was a simple girl, the simplest in the

world. It had been easy enough to sing his way into her heart that evening at her house; but he seemed to have lost his position again with equal ease.

Her very pallor no longer persisted, and she danced lightly and well in his arms, and her eyes were ready to meet his gaze and defy it calmly.

So he looked at her with a new mind, and told himself that he never had seen her before! The instant that he was sure he had lost her, she became a treasure utterly beyond price.

"He's left my trail—Kinney, I mean?"

"Yes. Forever."

"It can't be true," said the boy.

"It is true."

He laughed bitterly.

"I'll have him crazy to eat me alive. I'll have him that way in another ten minutes. But you and me—it's good-by, final and forever for the two of us, Kate?"

"Yes," she said gently.

"You didn't mean what you said to me that night?"

"I meant it as much as you meant it. I got over it the next day," she said.

And again her eyes lifted to his, and if her heart were breaking, it did not keep her from baffling him utterly with a mocking little smile.

He was tagged at that instant, and she was swept away by another dancer. But still her smile followed him, over the shoulder of her new partner.

Young Jack Aberdeen, suddenly dizzy, found his way to the edge of the hall, heard the music pause for an intermission, and then stepped onto the balcony.

The cool air chilled his face, restored him suddenly, and he stood there gripping the railing and trying to take stock of what he had lost. He had had her in the palm of his hand and thought she was a bright bit of glass; now he saw that she had been a blazing diamond, and he himself had been a fool!

He bit his lips.

These many weeks, pitting himself against the patience and the craft of the marshal and the marshal's men and all the pow-

ers of the law, he never had found his strength deficient; but now he was at a loss and felt that there was nothing he could do.

He felt that he could understand quite clearly what had happened. She, taken suddenly by his appearance at her door, his singing, and the thing which he had just done, had been tipped off balance. That was his only moment with her. Afterward, her mind had gone back to the marshal. But when she and Kinney agreed together once more, it was a simple thing for her to say a word for this man whom she had loved for five minutes.

He, Happy Jack Aberdeen, was a starveling cur, and she was throwing him a cheap handful of charity!

At this, his face burned, and he trembled. There were many emotions and impulses in him at that moment. He was the spoiled child now thwarted seriously for the first time; he was the prince of adventure, whose least look other girls had not been able to resist; but now he was helpless. Above all, he was a man in love!

To one of his nature, it was impossible to sit quietly, submitting to defeat. Against her he could do nothing; but he felt that he could demonstrate that Kinney was more bull than man, and that he could bait the famous marshal almost to madness.

To do it now, before the eyes of the girl, with all the dance hall looking on—that would be a consummate pleasure! To turn Kinney into a raging fiend before her eyes; to make him throw his promise to the winds; to draw him like a baited bull in a furious charge, gun in hand—that would be the most delightful of all possibilities, the boy felt.

But how could it be done?

He closed his eyes and gripped the rail hard; his mind was in a fever of excitement; and suddenly his head tipped back and he laughed, noiselessly, there in the night. He had his inspiration, and straightway he set about to execute it.

There was a fire-escape stairway, breaking sharply down from the end of the balcony, and down this he ran lightly, and found his way to the line of horses tethered at the hitching racks. There he reached his horse for the night. It was not

Rags. Her beauty was enough to draw any eye; and once seen in this town, she was sure to be recognized, even in the semi-dark. But it was Champ Logan's second mount, a lump-headed mustang with a heart of brass and the temper of a fiend.

The horse showed its pleasure in seeing its rider by twitching its head about and trying to snap his arm off at the elbow, but he avoided the thrust and dipped his hand into a big saddlebag.

The hand came out carrying a guitar, which he tucked under his arm, and went back.

The tune was already in his head, and as he climbed the stairs, going back up the fire escape again, the words began to drift lightly into his mind, for he had a rare gift of improvisation. He laughed again, and again his laughter was silent, for he could visualize the scene in the dance hall when those words rang through the window. First of all, however, he must find a secure place. He raised his head and began to scan the eaves just above the balcony. It would require a cat to get to them, but who was more catlike than Jack Aberdeen?

CHAPTER XXXII

SONG, LAUGHTER, AND SORROW

THE dance having paused for a moment, there was a swirl of people forming in groups for talk, and the talk was on one subject only.

There was probably not a soul in the hall, by this time, who did not know that Happy Jack Aberdeen was there with them. Those in the outer hall were sure he was in the dance room; those in the dance room were sure that he was in the outer hall. And with delighted whispers, his impudent daring was commented on, and the boldness with which he had announced himself.

To most of these people there was something more pleasant than his courage, and that was the frank trust with which he had committed himself to their hands, in spite of the presence of the great man hunter in that very room. And they were willing to live up to the trust. If they looked at the marshal, it was only for a flash. If they laughed aloud, it was with their eyes turned away from him.

But a wave of excited noise began to rise in the dance hall, and the marshal, listening and looking around him, sneered with contempt. He had had enough of this sort of thing; but he was not anxious to take Kate home until she began to show some sign of fatigue.

In the meantime, a young rancher with a place neighboring his had stopped by to extend condolences, and there was much for which the marshal could expect sympathy.

A fire had taken down a great barn, packed with good hay of the year before; the appearance of a mysteriously poisonous weed had killed scores of his best cattle; and there was a general sense of disaster hanging over the Kinney place. The whole

countryside felt it, and shook its head, waiting for the full extent of the calamity to develop.

The marshal merely shrugged his great shoulders, talking of these things.

"I'll have some time, now, to tackle the job again," said he.

"Time now?" repeated his neighbor vaguely.

The marshal said with heat: "There'd be some would like to see me spend the rest of my days ridin' like fury on the trail of the kid. I've got someting else to do in life!"

It was his first announcement of his change of policy, and when he saw that it made his companion stare, it angered him greatly. But at this moment there was heard a thing which gradually stilled the noise in the dance hall.

It was the sound of a guitar, played with an expert touch, with a swinging, galloping rhythm. It seemed to float in through the windows from the outer spaces of the night, and the touch of this master player stopped the talk.

Hardly had the hall begun to grow quiet when a strong, rich voice broke out:

> "Bill Kinney, Bill Kinney, oh, where have you been?
> There's dust on your face and your hoss is caved in;
> There's rust on your gun and sand in your eye
> And a frown on your forehead. Why, Bill, why?"

In that hall all talking ceased. People listened with a frozen eye to this clamor, and then turned suddenly toward the marshal himself, who stood with the look of one who is falling through space, so stunned was he by the sound of the voice of the singer and the pleasant ringing of the guitar.

There was no other musician in Debney Wells who had such a touch upon the instrument as Happy Jack Aberdeen; it could be no other than that most impertinent of youthful fiends!

So said the marshal to himself, and then drew a breath and said not a word, but looked suddenly down to the floor. The singer in the outer night, having made a little pause at the end of his first stanza, as though to let his audience compose itself

to hear the rest, went on in a louder tone, with a peculiar bubbling effect of laughter here and there in the music:

"Bill Kinney, Billy Kinney, what have you done?
Have you been racin'? And have you won?
Have you been ridin' and cuttin' up capers
For the sake of the fun or the sake of the papers?

"Bill Kinney, Bill Kinney, oh, what is the talkin'
Of hosses runnin', and trottin', and walkin',
From Debney Wells to the Harbridge Plain
And Kinney wearin' a look of pain?

"Bill Kinney, Bill Kinney, in Schuyler Pass
Where the walls jump up as smooth as glass,
The echoes are roarin' before and after
And it sounds a heck of a lot like laughter.

"Bill Kinney, Bill Kinney, I won't be harsh,
But are you a fish that can swim in the marsh,
And a runnin' fox, and a bird in the sky,
And all for nothin'? Why, Bill, why?"

The song ended.

As it progressed, the audience in the hall did not stir. The men who idled in the outer hall remained with their cigarettes unraised in their hands, until the tobacco curled up in fumes, and the hot cinders scorched their skin; and the girls in the dance hall seemed almost afraid to draw their breaths as they looked at one another. But finally the full current of all attention washed toward the marshal in a strong tide and clung to him with strength.

It was as though his face were a mirror in which strange things were to be seen. It was as though something radiated out from him, giving a point and a comment to the words of the song.

For his own part, he was going through a vast struggle. He had given the girl his promise that he would endure and he would not strike again at her lover. She was precious beyond

all things to him, and therefore he finally fixed his glance upon her, and studied her, and pored over her beauty, and tried to make the contemplation of her a thing sufficiently strong to shut the stinging words of the singer from his ears.

But as the song went on the strain became greater and greater.

It had been a different thing, in his imagination. He had conceived of the boy flying with all speed, his head turned, looking behind him, in terror every instant lest the marshal and the rest of his hard-riding posse should appear above the horizon, and in that manner the boy would scurry off, north or south or east or west, and sink below the horizon and disappear forever.

That had been the marshal's conception, but instead of that, Jack Aberdeen was here in Debney Wells itself, in the marshal's own home town, in the very dance hall, flaying him with a whip of scorpions.

It seemed almost to the marshal that no matter how the great duel between them eventually terminated, even if he were to capture the boy and bring him home with his hands tied in the small of his back, still the victory would remain with young Aberdeen, in the minds of other men. They would remember the immortal mockery of this evening long after they remembered all other things connected with the lives and the deaths of William Kinney and Happy Jack! He, the marshal, was pinioned in the stocks, and the small children could come and leer and laugh in his face!

The deed had been done.

Even Kate Marvel was not worth the price of this consummate agony. And as he decided that he must stop and crush the singer, the song ended and a high, rich peal of laughter came floating in through the windows.

The face of the marshal was contorted and livid. He rolled his eyes, exactly like the bull which the boy had hoped to rouse in him. One hand visibly grasped the butt of a Colt. The other hand was balled into a fist, which, it was said, once had killed a man with a single blow. And finally he rushed headlong across the floor of the dance room.

The moment he stirred from his place he was undone.

While he remained standing, the force of his frame, of his dignity, froze up the rivers of laughter which had collected all about him. But now, as he rushed toward the balcony door, he reminded every one too forcibly of a headstrong old man, irritated to madness by the stinging teasing of a child.

And the laughter burst out. A single peal had set it off and brought the marshal into motion. That was the laughter of the singer himself, from outside. But now floods of mirth roared and pealed and rang in the ears of the marshal.

He checked himself a little, halfway across the room, and glared terribly about him.

Behold! It only raised a more enormous mirth!

He saw men holding their sides, with faces of agony. He saw girls falling into each other's arms and shrieking with delight. Some people were rocking slowly back and forth, hands on hips, like pendulums worked from below and set in motion by their invincible laughter. He saw heads tucked down, and sideways, and strained back. He saw gaping mouths, and eyes closed with the wrinkles of amusement. He saw tears running down red, quivering cheeks.

"They've all gone mad!" said the marshal in his rage. And he reached the door to the balcony.

It was locked.

Sudden silence came upon the crowd.

"Try the windows, Bill," said the voice of the tormentor.

And the strangling crowd screamed with enjoyment.

They would have laughed at anything now, and for some reason it made the marshal seem tenfold more ridiculous when he was observed actually taking the advice of the hunted man.

He went through the window with a lunge. Glass crashed and tinkled.

But there he was on the outer balcony, and now—

Yes, by heavens! from the roof, the voice of the singer was heard to repeat the last stanza of his song:

"Bill Kinney, Bill Kinney, I won't be harsh,
But are you a fish that can swim in a marsh,

And a runnin' fox, and a bird in the sky,
And all for nothin'? Why, Bill, why?"

At the conclusion of this stanza, even above the agonized peals of laughter from the crowd, and those shrieks of delight like shrieks of pain, above the stamping of feet and the smiting together of hands, and the Indian whoops of the cow-punchers, intoxicated with amusement—above all these sounds could be heard the wild voice of the marshal, raised to a roar of rage and vengeance.

He was heard clambering, falling back, starting again.

He was trying to gain the roof. It was hard for him. He was no cat like Happy Jack Aberdeen.

But at last he was up there against the stars, in the pure air, and they could hear his tremendous voice bellowing:

"You sneakin' rat and you treacherous gopher snake, now come out of your hole and stand up to me! I'm gunna break you in bits and drop the chunks of you down to the street, to the dogs! Where are you, Happy Jack!"

One of the windows on the side of the hall opposite to the balcony windows was now opened, from the outside, and through the aperture appeared the slender, graceful form of the boy, one flash of brilliant braid and splendid color.

And he stood by the window and laughed a little, and dusted his sleeves and his knees and waved to the crowd in the most cheerful manner in the world.

What a vast yell went upward then! What a Niagara of sound! One would have thought that some important victory had been won, and the people were rejoicing for it!

It was only that a clever young rascal stood beside an open window, with the breeze ruffling his hair, and a guitar tucked under his arm, laughing at the thunders of challenge which boomed upon the roof of the dance hall. And the ceiling quivered, as the giant stamped vainly up and down, in search for his quarry among the chimney pots!

Happy Jack, with a gesture, plucked off a black wig and mustaches and sideburns. He adjusted his guitar under his arm, he raised one hand, and that crowd of yelling madmen, that

host of cheering, laughter-weakened men and women, grew silent, strangling in their silence, moaning with the necessity of it. Happy Jack sat in the sill of the window through which he had entered, and, bending back his handsome young head, he began to sing again:

> "Bill Kinney, Bill Kinney, I won't be harsh,
> But are you a fish that can swim in a marsh,
> And a runnin' fox, and a bird in the sky,
> And all for nothin'? Why, Bill, why?"

Although it was the third repetition of this verse, it seemed at the moment so apt and proper in its application that the crowd was more delighted than before.

There was a noise of clambering on the outside, and a great shout of fury from that Ajax.

"Hurry up, Jack!" yelled every voice in the dance hall. "Hey, Jack, get out of here, boy!"

But he was in no hurry. He walked slowly, gracefully, across the floor. When he distinguished a particular friend, he paused and waved to the man, or the girl.

So through the parting wave of people, near the exit door, he passed the spot where Kate Marvel stood like one risen in her sleep.

He paused a single instant there, and as he looked at her, the cruelty and the pride of his evening's exploit suddenly were dimmed for him. He stepped to her suddenly, and raising her hand, he touched it with his lips, and then went hastily out as Kinney burst in the balcony door with the weight of his shoulder and came lurching through, a gun in either hand.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TALK WITH AN EDITOR

No hand was lifted to arrest the boy in his passage down the stairs. If he had been ten times a criminal, still they would not have budged to stop him; but somehow the marshal found it difficult to crush his way through that same crowd at the heels of young Jack Aberdeen.

He got to the front door in time to see a horseman departing at a canter down the street, and the marshal, swiftly estimating that the light was too bad and the distance too great to permit a gunshot, raced to his own horse—only to find that it was gone!

It was not far away, but Happy Jack had taken the thoughtful precaution of placing the marshal's horse at the opposite end of the hitching rack. The big man took the next horse at hand. He could requisition it in the name of the law! And flinging himself into the saddle, he spurred it forward, only to find that the blindness of his rage had made him select a broken-down old gelding which stumbled and lurched beneath his weight.

The marshal looked up to the sky as if to seek there the answer to the unkind fate which was dogging him, making a fool of him. But he would not turn and go back. He felt that it would be useless to pursue Aberdeen if the other had another moment of head start, so he rushed on out of town at the best gallop he could raise from his borrowed horse.

The broad, blind face of the night lay before the marshal, but still he rode on, taking the straightest path, only praying that it might lead him right.

But he was wrong again.

His horse drawn back into the dark mouth of an alley, Jack Aberdeen had waited there until the marshal thundered past. And when Kinney was out of sight, he turned about and

jogged back down the street until he came to the office of the Debney Wells *Bugle*.

It was the last-moment rush of items for the next morning's issue, and the little office was all in a stir, long-legged Sam Phelps being everywhere, shouting himself hoarse, a green celluloid visor over his eyes throwing a ghastly, greenish hue upon his face.

But, when the door opened and he saw Jack Aberdeen enter, he threw up his arms with a yell of joy and rushed for him.

Pounding his typewriter with hysterical speed, he had labored and struggled until he had beaten out a story of the appearance of Happy Jack in the dance hall. He had felt himself the chronicler of a great moment in the history of the West, and he felt that he had risen to his opportunity.

Now here was the man himself!

He was willing to hold the press until the dawn, if that were necessary, for the sake of the story that was to come.

But the boy sat down on the edge of his desk, and with his back to the door, made himself at home. One might have thought that all danger was banished from his life, so at ease was he. The printers. the two cub reporters, the janitor, a few hangers-on, packed themselves into the doorways and looked in.

Sam Phelps, his pad before him, and a stock of sharpened pencils thrust into the breast pocket of his waistcoat, prepared to pour forth a flood of shorthand notes.

"I'm gunna raise the hair on the head of some of those Eastern editors!" said Sam Phelps. "I'm gunna make them see that they're not the center of the newspaper world when it comes to news. You got a statement to make, and I'm gunna publish it in letters an inch high. And—"

"You're all wrong," said the boy. "I'm going to get news from you; I'm not going to give it!"

The jaw of Sam Phelps dropped.

Then, determined to make something out of whatever came his way, he nodded: "You can have anything in this shop, son! What you want?"

He chuckled as he explained the reason of his generous

impulse: "I've had more'n fifty leaders out of you in the last two months. I'd hire you to keep riding, Happy Jack!"

"I want to know what I've done."

"Done? Why, busting Charlie Lake was just a beginner, I suppose! Leavin' the loose an' liberal smears of twenty posses wrecked around in the mountains—that's a little something, I suppose. Is that what you mean?"

"I've seen your papers, Sam. I'm a desperado in 'em."

"You sure are, son! The neatest little desperado that's ever waked up this neck of the woods."

"Look here, Sam. Am I desperate?"

"Whatcha mean? A man who—"

"Do I look desperate now?"

Sam Phelps began to answer, and then he saw a point in this remark that baffled him and stopped his flow of words.

"I'm no desperado," said Happy Jack persuasively. "I'm a common cow-puncher. Mind you, I want you to have the straight of this. They're beginning to give me a black name. They're saddling a lot of things on my shoulders. Every time a safe is cracked the last couple of months, they say I must've had a hand in it. It's not true. Charlie Lake got what was coming to him. Breaking out of jail—it was the boys of the town that took me out! The stealing is a lie, too. I left the marshal my own hoss and saddle to pay for the saddle on his mare, and his mare come to me on the bet that I won."

"That sounds all straight," said Sam Phelps, rubbing his long nose. "I never thought of that!"

"Since then I've done nothing wrong, except to run away from 'em. Except up there at Schuyler Pass. They had me cornered—well, I got loose. A couple of the boys got hurt, but nobody bad. I shot low. I'll get hold of the coin to pay those boys' doctor bills. You see, Sam? I want to square myself!"

The jaw of the editor dropped. For he saw in this desire a sudden end to the brilliant series of articles which had swelled his circulation; particularly, he saw an end to the ten-cent "extras" which were so dear to his heart and so profitable to his bank account.

But then his eye gleamed again. This, after all, was a story in itself, a unique story, one that never had been done before. Swiftly his pencil was running upon the pad, taking down every word. He was so well trained in this business that he could work automatically, like a machine. And the pencil was dripping upon the pad such phrases as "Debonair and handsome as ever—sitting on edge of desk, swinging foot—golden gleam of spoon-handled spurs—careless—back to door—fearless—the notched handles of the Colt thrusting out from the worn holster—the blue of the eye like the blue of a gun barrel and—"

"You say you want to square yourself, son?"

"That's what I want. And that's what I want you to tell me. How can I do it?"

The editor gasped again. "Something to put you straight?"

"Something to put me straight. That's right!"

"Why, Happy, I don't know. I never thought of that before. I don't know what you could do!"

The boy sighed.

"There's gotta be some way," said he. "The first thing that I know, I'll have my back against a wall, and somebody'll be hurt—maybe worse than me! Y'understand?"

Grimly the editor nodded.

"I've done no murder. I don't want to do none," said the boy. "But it ain't self-defense when you shoot at a gent that's got a warrant for your arrest. You see the hole that I'm in, Sam?"

"I sure see that! Wait till I get hold of Baxter, the lawyer. He'll be able to tell you!"

"I've got about a half minute longer," said Happy Jack. "Old friend of mine is apt to show up there in the door almost any minute and start talkin' with powder and lead. Y'understand how it is?"

Sam Phelps sighed. "A governor's pardon looks like the only thing outside of jail that ever could square you," he said.

"The governor would never dare," said the boy sadly.

Then he added: "If I came in and gave myself up, what would they do to me?"

"The pen, I suppose."

"How long?"

"I don't know. I'll find out. You'll see the answer on the front page. I'll write you a letter every day, son, and you'll find it on the front page!"

The idea seemed brilliant journalism to the editor. It would give him a vast prestige in the town. It would be a unique turn in journalism for an editor to correspond with a fugitive criminal by means of published articles, which all might read! He rubbed his hands at the thought of it.

Besides, he would be thus expressing the manifest desire of the whole town. They loved the brilliant boy who had made Debney Wells famous and would make it still more renowned with this night's joyful exploit.

"Now get out and take care of yourself, Happy. The marshal never will get to you."

"I've about used up my luck," said the boy, "and I'm afraid that him and me one day will have a show-down. If he don't catch me, I'm afraid that maybe I'll turn back and find him. Y'understand, Sam? It's hard to keep runnin' when you think you might have an even break with the gent that's chasin' you. Mind you, Sam, it ain't the marshal that I'm runnin' away from! It's the law that he's got behind him. This ain't for your paper to publish."

San Phelps, looking at the lean, brown face of the boy, nodded. He could see in his mind's eye the massive form of the marshal, and behind him, like a shadowy host, the powers of the law riding without sound.

"I'll slope along," said the boy. "Good night, Sam. Anything you can let me know, thanks a lot."

He paused in the doorway and waved his hand. Then he was gone, and left Sam Phelps leaning on the edge of his desk, for the first time in his life without words.

For he had a sudden new vision of himself and of his profession, and he wondered if he and his paper did not live upon the sins, the follies, and the deaths of men, such men as that gallant young figure which had just ridden out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXIV

HITCHED TO A STAR

Wise Sam Phelps!

Never did he build upon more solid ground than when he built upon the love of the public for Happy Jack Aberdeen!

He had the popularity of a famous baseball player, an actor, and a hero, because he walked across the public eye in one of those roles constantly. And the letters of advice and personal chat which appeared upon the front page of the *Bugle* were read with delighted interest on all hands. It was a subtle defying of the law that pleased every man. The little *Bugle*, its brand-new press stammering and clanking and whirring night and day, managed to pour out fifty thousand copies, and every one of them was snatched up, and the demand grew and grew.

Sometimes Sam Phelps would groan and roll up his eyes. He had more circulation than he could supply. There were little outpost towns where a single *Bugle* was religiously circulated through a hundred hands, and the file of them was preserved. To this day there will be found, in odd corners of the West, some of those old files of the *Bugle*, dealing with the period of the famous pursuit of Happy Jack Aberdeen. They are tattered, battered, torn at the corners, and covered with dust. But they contain some of the most exciting reading that could be found anywhere.

After his visit to Debney Wells, which sent a shock of joyous surprise throughout the range, Happy Jack went south again, and it was felt that he would go straight on to Mexico if he could get there.

In the Champion Hills he found the air too thick with "wasps."

Three county sheriffs joined hands with big posses. It was not that they hated young Happy Jack Aberdeen, but the

challenge which he had thrown down to the law was too patent, and every man who wore a badge of public office had to blush for the manner in which the youngster was befooling them.

In the Champion Hills, however, they made their great effort, and Happy Jack was turned back.

Old Logan was still with him; but it was the eye of the boy which saw the blinking of something more shiny than a cactus thorn on a day among the Champions. He shouted to Logan and jerked his horse aside just as three rifles spat in their faces. Logan went one way and the boy another, and that division saved both their lives.

They scattered away among the big boulders, and finally reunited just in time to see the heads of half a dozen horsemen charging over a hilltop on their right. That was enough warning for them, and they made their horses sprint down a long draw which led them out of danger.

But they had had enough, and by mutual consent they turned north. Three more times they sighted man hunters; they felt that they were riding out of the lines of a hostile army!

Their next maneuver was to try to head west across the Nevada desert, in the obvious hope of eventually losing themselves in San Francisco, and getting away on a ship to unknown lands. But in this hope they failed because the boy would not part from Rags. With her, they could perhaps distance pursuit, but they could hardly hope to cross the thickly populated plains of central California without being seen and recognized. Vainly did Logan plead that they should give up the animals and content themselves with the rods of a passenger train, or a "box" on a freight.

The boy was obstinate. He told Champ that he had a feeling that his luck was intimately connected with the possession of the mare. Under the eastern ridges of the Sierras, they sat by the side of a spring on a very cold, bleak, winter day, and talked the thing over, watching the chilly gushing of the water, and the frozen sides of the little stream in which it flowed away.

"A fast hoss keeps a gent in mischief," said Champ Logan.

"You get a gent with a slow hoss, and he never thinks of doin' nothin' wrong; but you give a gent a fast hoss, and he feels like he can dip into anybody's pocket and get away before they can catch him! It ain't size that makes a hawk a thief. It's the speed of the bird on the wing. Lemme tell you something, son. You chuck Rags, and you'll sure be a safe man! Chuck Rags, and climb aboard a train, and I'll have you at sea inside of a week or I'm a liar!"

"And what'll you do, Champ?" asked the boy with a grin.

"Me?" said Champ. "There's a lot of things that I could do, if I was put to it. I can handle a pack of cards so's to tell fortunes, but chiefly so's to make my own!"

The old fellow chuckled.

"I can auctioneer, make up horoscopes and such rot, and I can do a lot of other things like that! If you was to drop me in the middle of a desert, I wouldn't starve. I'd have the lizards givin' me their skins before the first day finished. But here I am, tied to the tail of a hoss, with a wild man alongside of me that's better known than the president around these here diggings. Your face is gunna be a fortune to you, Jack, and it'll be paid down to you in a suit of stripes, if that jackass back yonder in Debney Wells don't stop his brayin'!"

He took out the last copy of the Debney Wells *Bugle* which they had been able to find. It carried upon the first page a well-printed photograph of Happy Jack Aberdeen. And that same picture appeared in every day's issue.

This was not, however, as detrimental as old Logan pretended, for every one looked for that face, and that face only, and when Logan, out of his kit of odds and ends, had decorated his companion with any one of a dozen wigs, and placed on him any one of half a dozen short beards and mustaches, the boy was quite unsuspected. A dozen times he had ventured into crowds and come away unknown; the test at Debney Wells had proved what could be done.

"Here he is, bustin' loose with another one of his letters," said Champ Logan. "Dog-gone his hide, he won't let you rest!"

Set off in a heavy bracket, and printed in large letters, Sam Phelps had turned out another of his epistles.

DEAR JACK: You remember asking me about what the law would do to you?

There are ten lawyers in the county who will guarantee that you won't get more than five years. And with good behavior, that time will be cut down to three, or even to less. There's always the chance of being turned out on parole, too.

Think it over!

The boys all want to be remembered to you.

"Slim" Tom Harper came in the other day. He's walking with two sticks and getting around pretty nicely. You may not remember Tom very well, but he remembers you. You met him in Schuyler Pass and left him with a bullet hole in his leg. The hole is healed over as fine as you please, and Tom says that he bears no hard feelings.

We think that the other two who were dropped on that day feel the same way about you. They don't blame you, Jack, and we don't think that a jury would be too hard on you. You'd better come back and stand your trial.

Yours to the limit,

The Debney Wells *Bugle*, by
SAMUEL PHELPS.

P. S. You'll be interested to know that your old friend, Marshal William Kinney, has had a long run of hard luck, and now his ranch is marked down for a foreclosure sale. You'll find the details in another column on this page.

Champ Logan read this letter aloud slowly, as though he were digesting the contents for the first, instead of the fifth, time.

"There ain't any chance to fade out while this sort of stuff is bein' printed and read," said he. "There ain't any chance at all, son! It's almost as though you was payin' him to keep you in print. And the crook that's remembered long enough is gunna take a big rest in a jail, sooner or later."

"I ain't a crook, Champ," insisted the boy.

"Sure you ain't," said Champ, and grinned. "You're just a dog-gone adventurer, ain't you?"

He went on: "I recollect old Pete Stanton. Pete, he must've blowed fifty safes in his day, but he was so dog-gone quiet

about it that he was an old man before he got into the newspapers, and then he had saved so much money that he was able to buy his way out. What did he get? About half a million, all told. What did you get? A few sides of bacon, and a little coffee, and such stuff. You ain't even borrowed a suit of clothes that you didn't return. But they're playin' you up for a life sentence!"

"They're not," said the boy. "You see what he says. Five years, and that cut down to three for good behavior, and maybe a parole after a year or so. Champ, I'm going back to face the music and take my turn!"

"You'd make a pretty picture, comin' into the courtroom on the arm of Mr. Kinney, eh?"

The boy flushed. "I'll take that medicine," said he.

"You're a fool," said the other, "and you're twice a fool because you're a young one. You believe what's in this here paper? Why, there never was a true thing printed in any paper. They don't aim to print the truth, because the truth never is exciting enough. They'll give you about fifty years, and if you throw it up to Phelps, he'll say that it was all a mistake and a misprint. He'll blame the typesetter for settin' up five instead of fifty. They've always got a way of ducking loose, these here reporters, and all such!"

The boy hesitated. The temptation of that letter was very great, and for the two days since he had read it he had been turning the matter back and forth in his mind.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted.

"We'd better go on," said the older man. "You won't chuck the mare?" He pointed across the flat to a streak of smoke. "There's the westbound express!" said he. "Snake you down to Frisco in less'n a day."

But Happy Jack rubbed the nose of the mare and shook his head.

"Ask me to chuck an arm or a leg," he answered.

"Then it's north, north!" said the old fellow grumpily.

"For me, maybe. But you—take the westbound and save yourself, Champ. You ain't meant for this sort of travelin' all of the time."

Old Champ laughed.

"Kid," said he, "I've done what the schoolbook says. I've hitched myself onto a star, and I ain't gunna let go even if I'm kinder out of breath!"

CHAPTER XXXV

CHAMP TELLS HIS STORY

They did not go north at once, however, but laid a long course toward the direct east, where for two weeks they dropped out of the ken of men, until finally they were recognized by sheerest chance—or perhaps it would be fairer to say, through the wide advertising which they had received. For a boy of six, wandering on his pony, hunting, had a mere glimpse of two men, one on a gray horse. And skillfully shadowing the pair through the hills, he had come close enough to see the size and the beauty of the mare. So he had come back, with his air rifle, at full gallop and babbled out his story.

Other men rode out. There was such a price now on the heads of the two that it was worth any man's hunting.

Down south, in Harbridge, they had uncovered such testimony of the long criminal career of old Champ Logan that they had piled up more than six thousand dollars as a reward for him, dead or alive. He had not always been a merciful old man, either; there were deaths at his door, and the State will pay high for killers. There were rewards for the capture of the boy, too, although the law did not recognize the legality of using bullets on him—unless he resisted lawful arrest!

So men went out to hunt for the two.

These man hunters were of all sorts. Sometimes there were youngsters who agreed together that they would go out and try their luck and attempt to make their fortunes. Sometimes there were grim, hardy old trappers and hunters from the upper mountains, who cared not very much for the difference between a human scalp and the pelt of an animal. They hunted the two with no more enthusiasm than they would have hunted a pair of wolves whose hides were worth five thousand apiece. As for the danger, that did not matter.

There were other criminals, barely at peace with the law, ready to pretend the comradeship of the open trail if ever they should fall in with the wanderers, and ready to betray them.

So, in the midst of these dangers, in the dead of the winter, they pursued their way to the north. Twice the horses carrying old Logan began to give out, and they had to get new ones, leaving the worn-out animals in exchange for the fresh, "borrowed" ones.

Young Aberdeen hated that part of the business. He would rather have had a share in almost any crime than horse stealing, but he could not abandon old Logan, any more than old Logan would abandon him.

A dozen times he would have been lost had it not been for the cunning wits of that veteran, wise as a fox, and enduring as a hunted wolf; and he had saved Logan once, carrying him bodily off on the gray mare, which ran on under the double burden when the mustang had broken down. The nearness of the evening had saved them, then.

Now, upon a January day, and toward the bitter end of that month, they arrived at a beautiful frozen valley such as the boy never had seen before in all his life.

It was all white from ridge to ridge, except for little streakings of darkness here and there, where the young pine trees lifted through the drifted snow; and in the center of the valley there was a long, winding shadow. That was the face of the river.

Over the smooth places the surface was crusted with ice wonderfully pure and unclouded, but so strong that it would bear the weight of horse and rider. That ice was so like glass that, riding upon it, they could look down to the wrinkles and the shadows of the waters flowing beneath. But where the water flowed more rapidly, between pools, the ice could do no more than lock up the little inlets and the shallow edges of the stream, and sometimes thrust out a venturesome finger which the stream would soon break off again.

This stream was the only voice in the valley, and it kept a soft tremor in the air, like the singing of a spring breeze; that voice was continually changing, as the valley widened and

narrowed and the echoes rolled gently back from the hillsides, or flowed away unbroken into the mountain air.

It was such a valley as a child would have loved to run headlong down. It was such a place as grown men would have picked for their homes. Pioneers could not have driven their wagons past it, to be sure. Because behind it the lower mountains rose, and then the taller ones behind, and finally, the giants whose heads are covered with bluish-white all the year.

But everything was composed of white and black now, in this landscape. All was purest light, or all was purest shadow, with strange, pastel shades collected mysteriously at the edges of the horizon, and along the flowing slopes of the hills.

They wound down the stream, listening to the crunching hoofs of their horses and to the talking of the stream, until they came about a bend and saw the valley narrowing before them, and in the midst of it there was a building, heaped over and given a rounded back by the snows, but with two dark windows looking forth at them.

"There's the mill," said the veteran.

His breath was a mist of white-shining ice crystals, through which the sun shone for the moment, and then puffed away to nothingness. And the boy looked at him with wonder.

"Did you know that it would be there, Champ?"

"I knew it, of course."

"You've been up here before, then?"

It seemed as though Champ Logan always had been for a long period in every spot where they roamed. The boy was sure that if the sum of the years of his wanderings were computed according to the statements of Champ, they would be found to extend to thousands of decades. Otherwise, one life could not be spread over such an unconscionable length of time.

"Have I been up here before?" repeated Champ. "Well, whatcha think? I was born in the mill, there!"

He laughed, and his breath spurted out whitely, like the jetting smoke from a railroad engine.

"Champ, you beat me."

"Well, you ain't much to beat," said Champ.

It was his habit, on occasion, to say things in such a way that the boy could not tell when he was speaking with a dry good nature, or simply deliberately abusing his companion, and this was exactly such a phrase. It made the boy scowl and then look away sharply across the hills. Of course, he could not take offense at every whim of an old man, and it began to dawn upon him that Champ Logan was much older than Champ believed.

Every day of this cold weather his face pinched and turned more blue. And every day his eyes seemed more buried beneath his brows. He looked very little like the good-natured old gossip who idled upon the front veranda of the Harbridge hotel, and planned and executed his deeds of plundering with the assistance of his band. So the boy looked at him tolerantly.

"All right, Champ," said he. "I ain't going to argue with you! That mill might be a place for the night. There isn't much of the day left about it, and if you were born here—"

"I was born there, on that hump beside the mill. If you was to dig through the snow, you'd find some foundation walls and some charred wood under the ground. There was a house there; the mill was hitched into it; my dad was a mighty rich man, son, and he farmed this here whole valley and made it as slick as a song. Y'understand?"

"I understand," said the boy. "But what I don't make out is where have the farmers gone now?"

"They wiped them out," said Champ Logan, "and the land, they let it go to heck. What did they care?" He pointed. "Over yonder was a heavy grove, in them days. That was where the sheriff laid in with his men."

"Sheriff?" said the boy. "What was the sheriff doin' there, Champ? Protecting your cows from rustlers?"

Champ Logan's horse paused, and Champ himself seemed unaware of the halt, so dark and grim was the interest with which he looked upon this place.

"There was a no-account brindle roan hoss, a dog-gone useless mustang that I can remember to this day," said Champ Logan. "That hoss had four white feet, and I never seen a hoss before that was any good with four white stockings, and

neither did you or nobody else, because they ain't made that way except when the works is spoiled that ought to keep 'em runnin'. My old man, he brung this hoss out on a lead, one day. There was a good deal of talk about it. He said that the hoss was his, and caught up on his own land. And along comes the sheriff and says that that's a stolen hoss.

"I remember how he sat his hoss in front of the door and demanded that hoss be give up to him; and the old man, he laughed out hard and high, and says to dang the sheriff and everything else, and to take that hoss, if he could. And the sheriff, he sung back that my old man was a hoss thief, and had started that way, and made most of his money that way, and that nothin' was suited to the fit of his neck but a hangin' rope! The old man side-stepped and split the crown of the sheriff's sombrero wide open and the sheriff, he cut for cover.

"He didn't ask no questions after that, but he was plumb worked up, and the way that he and his men laid into the house was a caution. They laid off among the trees in good shelter, and they pumped their high-powered Winchesters and drilled us clean from side to side. And the old man and me and Tom, we pranced around from window to window and shot back at 'em, and Sally, she loaded guns—Sally was my sister—and my ma, she shouted to us to blast 'em out from those trees.

"And in the middle of things something happened that was bad luck. A bullet must've come through the kitchen window, and it hit the side of the kitchen stove and just natcherally crumpled up the cast-iron plate that was the side of the fire box. The plate tumbled out, and after it tumbled most of what was in the fire box. Before we knowed it, there was a smell of smoke inside of the house. And then—"

His lips still moved, but his voice ended. When he began again, he had skipped a part of the story.

"The sheriff and his men, they helped to try to stop the mischief that they had started. But it wasn't no use. That house got too well started, and the flames went bellerin' up to the middle of the sky, pretty near. That fire, it ate up a right fine pianer, and a ton of clothes and fine bedsteads and furniture that was brought out across the plains by ox teams in the old

days, and it chawed up the house to the bottom bones. But the mill, there, was made all of stone walls, mighty thick, and the wind blew from that quarter, so's the mill was hardly more than singed. But the fire blew on from the house and got started down the valley, and ate up the trees and the standin' grain, and made a bellerin' and a roarin' and shaved this here valley as clean as your cheek, kid.

"It busted my old man. My ma, she checked in pretty quick. Sally married a no-account houn' dog that I had to shoot because he killed her with grievin'. Tom dropped out of sight after gettin' a Canuck in Calgary, and here I am, the last of the tribe.

"Which might kind of explain the reason that I'm so dog-gone full of fondness for the law, kid, if you ever happened to notice?"

He finished this with a laugh as hard as iron, and the boy looked on him with a sad sympathy.

"Poor Old Champ!" said he. "If you hadn't had that happen, you would have been a rich man to this day, maybe, and living right here in this valley!"

"Most likely," said Champ, "and I'd be loungin' back in my leather chair right now, and readin' the Debney Wells *Bugle*, and sayin' what a lazy lot of skunks the marshals and the sheriffs and their posses are, that they let a pair of crooks ride half across the United States and can't catch 'em."

"Well," said the boy, "you'd have missed your share of fun, too, Champ, wouldn't you?"

Logan glanced quickly aisde at him.

"Is this fun to you, you young wildcat?" said he. "Aye, I believe it is!"

At this he shrugged his shoulders, and spoke to his mustang with a muttered oath. They rode on toward the mill, and again it seemed to the boy that his companion was growing very old, indeed. He seemed more bowed in his saddle, and his lips were twitching as he rode up to the door of the mill. There, however, he stretched out a mittened hand.

"Somebody's been here before us," he said.

And Jack saw tracks stamped into the snow about the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AN UNFINISHED LETTER

This made him dismount gingerly and step to the door with one hand upon a revolver. He kicked the door open and looked in. The room was big, with a ruined fireplace at one side and a few fragments of boards lying on the floor. They were obviously parts of the interior of the mill which had been torn down and used for a fire, and not long ago. There were a few scatterings of papers, and other signs of recent habitation, but no one was in sight.

"Wait out here, Champ," said Jack, "and watch the hosses. I'll have a look around."

Beyond the outer room, there was a big one within, with a lofty ceiling, and a wreckage of big machinery in the hollow of the floor. This must have been the mill itself, and through a hole in the wall passed the rusted and massive axle of the power wheel which had turned in the water outside.

There was a storage cellar below ground, very moist—in fact, with standing, green scum at one end of it and a foul odor. He left the cellar, and, climbing back through the mill room, he found a small stairs set into the wall, and went up it cautiously, because the steps threatened to crumble under his weight every moment. They were eaten away with mold and rot.

These stairs brought him to a sort of open landing or loggia above, which he had noticed dimly from the distance on approaching the building. The floor of the loggia originally had been wood, and fully half of this had fallen in, or else been torn away—perhaps to supply the fires that were occasionally built by travelers like themselves in the front room of the mill. The rest of the floor stood reasonably strong and intact, and walking about on it, he was astonished at the distance his

eye looked in every direction. For he could see over the ridge of the mill roof, and up and down the valley, to the point where the stream turned aside into a small, narrow-throated ravine. And across the hills which bounded the valley, he could look to the supplementary canyons beyond, and then to the huge mountains that began to climb up the sky.

The air was wonderfully clear, and the mere pleasure of casting his eye over such a sweep of country was exhilarating. It was almost like making that territory his own!

He pulled several of the heavy planks and dragged them down the stairs to the front room, where he found old Champ Logan already stripping the saddles off the horses and accommodating them at one end of the room.

He joined in the work of rubbing down the animals, merely remarking that he had searched the mill, and that no one was there at present, though the last occupants could not be far away, to judge by the condition of the ashes and the footprints about the door.

Old Logan said nothing to these comments, but busied himself silently about the horses. They had with them a sufficient weight of good, clean oats to feed the animals for this night, and for that they could be grateful. As for bedding, they found some shrubbery on the river bank beneath the mill, and with a few ax strokes they cut down enough to give bedding both to man and beast. It only needed to have the snow beaten and shaken thoroughly out of it, and then to be dried a little before the fire.

Logan took charge of this division of the labor, while the boy went out on a more important mission. They had with them a little salt and coffee, but otherwise they had not a morsel of food, unless they robbed their horses. And, far from doing that, they had learned before this that it is better to have a strong horse under the saddle than a strong rider in it!

They wanted meat, and the valley looked a most unpromising place, so Happy Jack took the rifle under his arm and trudged straight away for the next ridge of hills to the north.

Walking over the brow of it, he found himself in half an hour within sight of a small grove of second-growth timber.

The snow crunched loudly under his shoes as he went down the slope, and that noise served to scare up a fine young elk, which leaped out of the trees, floundered about when it saw the man, and started bolting in the opposite direction.

He took that racing body, and then that head, jerking with speed, tenderly within the field of his sights. It occurred to him to wonder a little why he never worried about missing a target in these days. That elk was dead as though it stood blindfolded a yard from the muzzle of his gun.

He fired, and saw it leap high into the air, and then fall headlong, turning over and over.

It was dead. It had a bullet through the heart, and the fall had broken its neck, besides. And as he stood beside it and looked down at the glazed, beautiful eyes, and at the red of the protruding tongue, an odd bit of moralizing passed through the mind of the boy.

It was about the provisions of Nature, which so strangely takes the finest of her animals and throws them heedlessly into the way of the hungry man, good or evil. And though this never had occurred to him before, a weird feeling of gratitude now rose in his innermost soul. And he remembered, too, a saying of Champ Logan's:

"If you don't find meat, it's because you ain't got an appetite!"

He had an appetite, now! He was hungry enough to eat raw flesh, since for three days they had been almost fasting. In the meantime, he fell to work upon the carcass and soon had the best of it cut up. He knew that they could not possibly carry with them more than four days' food, even in this bitterly cold weather; still, he could not help burdening his shoulders with more than a hundredweight, for it seemed a pity to leave this cream of the beast behind him.

With this load, he came trudging back to the house and found at the mill that everything was prepared. The coffee was already simmering on the fire and throwing its fragrance through the room. The horses crunched at their oats and stamped in their deep content, and the shrubs were fast drying near the fire and adding a resinous perfume of their own.

"Hey, Champ!" said the boy. "This ain't so bad, eh?"

"Why," said Champ, "them that ain't ate food with a touch of poison in it don't know what good food is."

"Whatcha mean by that?" asked Happy.

"I mean that we got trouble all around us, son. It's in the air. We're plumb breathin' of it. Look at this that was lyin' on the floor."

He handed a piece of paper to the boy, and set about the cookery, which was a work of artistry which he reserved to himself. The special duty of the boy was to fill the larder, and that of Champ was to empty it in the proper style.

In the meantime, dusk had come. Through the ragged rent of the window, very little light came from without, but the air beyond appeared like a deep-blue well. He sat close to the fire; his coat began to steam as he read a scrawled letter:

Dear Ma and Pa: Jerry and me and Phil Thompson, and Mike Odonell, are all lying up here in Logan Valley for to-night. It's a fair camp, though kind of musty smelling. We sort of hoped that Aberdeen and the other would be coming up this way, and I still think that they may. But the rest of the boys are voting me down and we start hiking for Sansome Creek to-morrow, where I'll mail this letter.

We have had a fine trip, and the horses are holding up pretty good, except that Mike's bay colt kind of played out in the deep snow yesterday. Mike was a fool to bring along such a young horse.

We all feel fine, and we all have sort of a hope that we may be able to do something in this line before we have to go back home, or somebody else beats us.

But it is pretty sure that they can't get away. If we don't get them, some other bunch will. We've met seven parties out for Aberdeen and Logan, and we've met them all inside of two days of marching. They all want that money as bad as we do, and they all are willing to fight for it. Well, Aberdeen and Logan are mighty smart and shifty, but they can't stay away from trouble all the time.

If we meet up with them, I think we'll have a show. That is, if we can take them by surprise. But otherwise—well, Aberdeen is a dead shot and fast as lightning, they say. But a funny thing is that he don't shoot to kill, and all the boys are counting on

that, and promising themselves that if they're shot through the legs, they'll hang onto their guns and keep on shooting from the ground.

It would be pretty sweet if we could land the bacon, all right. That would mean buying Mr. Green's northwest forty and maybe his whole eighty, and I could put up a cabin on that and marry Jenny. You tell her so, because I'm too busy to write to anybody but you.

The news that everybody has points to the two of them coming up in this direction. People are getting mighty excited, and some are betting that Aberdeen will break through to the Canada line. I see by the Debney Wells *Bugle*—

Here the letter ended.

CHAPTER XXXVII

INTO THE FIRE

The older man started as Happy Jack said suddenly:

"Champ!"

"Aye, kid."

"What did you say about enough appetite?"

"I said that them that are hungry are sure to get fed."

"Well," said the boy, "they're sure hungry enough for our scalps. It looks like they're clean starved for 'em."

Logan paused, carefully turning long splinters of wood which carried impaled upon them generous squares of venison, now beginning to spurt and splutter in the heat of the fire.

Then he remarked: "They're tryin' to work up in us an appetite for each other. Here's the *Bugle* that was lyin' on the floor!"

He threw it to the boy, who hastily spread out the front page. As usual, it was devoted from top to bottom to the description of the newest incidents in the great man hunt. There were two main details. One of these was the sale of the ranch of Marshal William Kinney. The eloquent hand of Sam Phelps appeared in the description.

He told how the crowd gathered for the auction, of the small number who were prepared to bid, of the speaking absence of the owner of the ranch, and then of the fine cattle, the drove of horses.

Money seemed to be short around Debney Wells, and it appeared to those who knew cows and horseflesh that things were selling at about half price. It was figured that the marshal would come out at least ten or fifteen thousand dollars beyond the mortgage.

But when the smoke of the buying and selling was finished, it appears that he had only about broken even by selling out

the last of his own saddle string. It left the famous marshal with just the horse he now was using in his great chase of Jack Aberdeen. The reader was invited to look on the editorial page.

On the editorial page, Sam Phelps had printed an eloquent and moving article, in which he referred to the sacrifice which the celebrated William Kinney had made for the sake of his public duty, and the hope was expressed that the world at large would be able to remember forever this instance of a man who abandoned his own private interests and allowed them to fall to ruin, while he dauntlessly clung to the man trail of an offender.

This editorial was printed in large type, and surrounded by a heavy, black-ruled border, the better to catch the eye and hold the interest. It seemed to the boy, indeed, a little falling away from the *Bugle's* old standards and something of an act of treason that the marshal, having been sneered at for so long, should be so suddenly praised and made a hero.

"They've hoisted the flag over Kinney," he said to his companion.

"Sure," said Logan. "Anything that makes circulation is what Phelps wants for his paper. When he can turn the life of somebody else into print, he'll forget all about you and me, son. Have you seen the rise in price on us?"

The boy scanned the page again, and inclosed in a similar black box appeared the statement in captial letters that the joint price on the two fugitives had risen to more than twelve thousand dollars, and that, moreover, either could be sure of a free pardon, if he would turn in the head of the other and secure his apprehension.

Upon the last sentence, the boy stared with bulging eyes. Then he cried out in a fury: "But you didn't see this, Champ!"

"The state's evidence stuff?" asked Champ dryly.

"Yes!"

"I seen it. Come and eat and stop yellin'. I ain't deaf!"

The appetite was half taken from Happy Jack Aberdeen, but he drew nearer to the fire and began to devour his portion of the roast meat.

"It means that they're gunna try to sell us to each other, Champ!"

"Aye, it means that. Make cannibals out of us!"

Happy Jack shuddered.

"I'll tell you what," said he. "You remember what you said to me?"

"About what?"

"That whenever you got really and truly hungry you'd be sure to find real food?"

"I remember that, son."

"Well, maybe it'll pan out in this case, too."

He made a quick gesture of infinite disgust.

"It was Kinney's idea," said Champ Logan. "He's had that idea before. When Pete Ingram and Doc Morton was hoofin' it across the hills, that was what the marshal done. He couldn't get very close to 'em, and so he sent out a bait that dangled in front of the noses of them both. Well, it was a pretty good idea. After a couple of days, the marshal come up to a camp in the rocks, and there he found Pete dead, and Doc dyin'. Doc had murdered Pete for the sake of the pardon and the reward, and Pete had only lived long enough to shoot Doc. And there you are for a fine party!"

"It's the worst thing that ever I heard," the boy insisted.

"Is it? Well, I'm an old man," said Champ. "I could retire and settle down fine on six thousand cash. I've sort of lost my ambitions!"

"You're gettin' played out," the boy taunted him.

"Nothin' more true ever was said," replied Champ Logan. "I got the collar around my shoulders, but I ain't pullin' my weight no longer."

The boy stared at him. He never before had heard Champ talk in this fashion, and the thing was too true for him to dispute it at once. He was glad when the supper was finished and the coffee drunk, and Champ Logan went to bed, where he lay silently for a time. The boy followed his example.

"So long, Champ. Good night," said he.

There was a mutter for a response, and presently he began to

hear a faint groaning which grew louder and louder. He listened to it with his heart beating loudly, for it told him that the sufferings of the older man from exhaustion and the cold had been too great for him to bear in silence except by a great effort of the will. That will was loosed by the coming of sleep, and the great groans were the natural expression of torment.

Jack could remember, now, that the face of his companion had been growing thinner and thinner, and his shoulders more bowed than ever during the last few weeks.

"This here is where I get my glory," old Champ had been fond of saying. It seemed even more true that this trail was where he would find his death. At any rate, he could not keep on much longer, and the day must come when he would slide from the saddle from pure exhaustion.

On that day, it would be the approach of the end for them both. Jack could not desert a weary comrade, and the result would be the capture of the pair. He pondered upon this grimly, but he could see no other alternative. And so he went to sleep.

He wakened with a faint chill, as though a cold hand had touched his face. He found that he had been asleep for some time, since the fire had sunk to two or three red eyes, from which a feeble glow reached out into the room. His blankets were comfortable enough, though still damp, and he could not understand that feeling of cold about the face. He closed his eyes, therefore, sleepily, wondering if there were enough sleep in all the world to glut his weariness. If sleep were a great ocean of shadows, he felt that he could drink it dry at one vast draft. A year of endless sleep would hardly be enough to rub away the ache from his brain and the dizzy sense of fatigue.

Yet his eyes fluttered open again. All his nerves were on edge, constantly, and that was why no sleep could be sound enough for a real rest. He had to live like a wolf, one eye always open for wind, weather, or the tooth and claw of an enemy.

This time he lifted his head the slightest bit, and as he did so, he saw what he took to be the silhouette of old Champ Logan standing over against the wall. Then he saw that it was

not a silhouette of Logan. It was not a silhouette at all, but the actual body of a bigger man than Logan ever was, in his strongest days!

Instinctively, his hand glided beneath his head and gripped the handle of a Colt. He saw the shadowy form which stood over the bed of Logan wave a hand, and into the inner doorway, which communicated with the big mill-room, stepped three more men, one crowding against the shoulder of the other, and each with a glint of weapons naked in his hands.

The boy wondered what that cold touch had been upon his face—the warning sent by a kind destiny, or the premonitory touch of death?

This thought took a tenth part of a second to be born and bloom in his mind; then he snatched the gun from beneath his head. For he could see a weapon heaved high in the hand of the giant and the blow about to descend upon the head of poor Champ Logan. He twisted half erect and fired. He knew as his finger closed upon the trigger that he had missed his mark, but the bullet came at least close enough to the face of the man to make him leap back with the wind of its passage.

He sprang off with a shout and whirled away from Champ and straight toward the boy.

A gun flamed in his hand. It seemed to be shooting forth flames, rather than bullets, and the trigger worked with wonderful speed. Perhaps it was an automatic. The boy thought of these things as he fired a second time. This time he did not miss, and the great bulk, with a scream, launched itself into the air and came crashing toward him.

He rolled from under the attack, and with that roll came, tigerlike, to his feet. Champ Logan, simply turning over on his stomach in his blankets, was firing with two guns. Another yell of pain from the doorway told that a second of the intruders had been hurt. And all three faded back into the doorway as they saw the boy rise to his feet.

They seemed to forget the advantage they had in their odds. They turned and ran, shouting to each other, one begging his friends to stand by him, but apparently running as fast as any of the others.

The big man, in the meantime, lay in a writhing heap in the corner in which he had crashed.

The boy stuck a gun in his face and told him to put his hands out.

"I'm done, I'm finished!" said the voice of Tiny Tom. "I've gone and jumped into the fire!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

TINY TOM AND OLD CHAMP

TIGERISHLY fast, Happy Jack rushed for the door. It slammed heavily in his face, and he heard the rusted bolt of the lock crunch home as he flung himself against it. He turned and sprang for the other door, but this one, likewise, had been locked from the outside. He could understand the plan of the assailants, by that. They had closed the outer door, and thereby blocked escape in one direction. Then they had come from the inside to blot out the two of them. One instant more of sleep on his part and the thing would have been done.

Thrice he put bullets through the lock of the front door before he could smash it open with the weight of his shoulder, and then, running out, he was only in time to see dim shadows floating away over the snow, and know that there went three riders at full speed. The mare was not even saddled, but if she had been, he would have flung himself on her and flown in pursuit.

Instead, he went back into the mill and found Tiny Tom groaning pitifully, and Champ Logan standing over him in disgust. He kicked the fire together, and as the flames jumped, he saw the body of Tiny Tom drenched with crimson; and more red dripped upon him from the hand of Logan.

"Champ, they've nicked you!" cried the boy.

"Grazed the skin," said Champ. "It ain't anything worth thinkin' about."

Without a glance for the desperately hurt Tom, Happy Jack helped his friend out of his coat, and then turned up the sleeve of his shirt. The firelight was not strong, but there was enough of it to make him see that the "scratch" was a great bullet hole torn straight through the soft flesh of the forearm. It was bleeding profusely, and the boy dressed it with speed

and care. It had suddenly occurred to him that there was no life to waste in the body of this old man. Other thoughts were in his mind, and in the mind of Champ Logan as well, he easily could guess, and among others these:

It had been almost impossible for Logan to stick to the trail before. He could not stick to it now with this serious injury to his arm. What could be done with him?

The bandage made, without a word from either of them, they turned to Tiny Tom, who was begging for help, and examined his wound. The bullet had passed through his right side. It had glanced along the ribs, apparently shattering two or more of them, and then it had glanced again from the hip bone, and was now lodged—as a pale blue spot showed—just under the skin at the back of the hip. A touch of a knife edge split the skin, and the battered slug dropped out in the fingers of the boy, while Tom groaned again.

He was shown the trophy, and his eyes bulged with fear and with horror.

"My gosh, look at it, will you?" said Tom. "It's been knocked out of shape again' my insides! There ain't nothin' but a junk shop inside of me, if that's what's happened to a slug of lead in me!"

Champ Logan refused to speak to his former colleague. But he said to the boy: "He ain't bleeding much unless he's bleeding inside."

"Can he live through it?" asked Happy Jack, in a murmur.

He knew little of wounds, but he was amazed when he heard Champ Logan respond: "Live through it? Why, he's just had the surface scratched! A wrappin' around him to make the ribs knit is one thing, and otherwise, what's happened? Why, nothin' at all. He's just had the surface plowed a little. It'll do him good, and maybe make some new ideas grow in him, dang his hide! Better knock him on the head, though. He's showed himself up too plain! What's a cur like that worth to us, kid?"

Disregarding his own sufferings entirely, he stood over the wounded giant and looked calmly down on him.

"There ain't any use in a carrier pigeon with only one wing;

or a three-legged greyhound; or one crutch. And there ain't any use in a gun-fightin' bad man that's been showed up to be a yaller swine!"

The man on the floor stirred and groaned.

"You don't mean it, Champ," he said. "I know a lot better than that the good heart that you got. Champ, you been like a father to me!"

"Sure I have, and that's why you come at me like a tiger and tried to claw me to death in my sleep. That's why you tried it in the swamp—and again out here with the price on my head, you dog!"

"Champ," whined Tiny Tom, "I been mighty wrong about it. I admit that I been wrong. But the best men in the world, they up and make a mistake now and then. You'd certainly admit that, wouldn't you?"

"Ah-h!" snarled Champ Logan, and suddenly leveled a gun.

Tiny Tom writhed and screamed, and held his hands before his face as though in this way he could shut out the sight of death; but Happy Jack, in a horror at the sight of this weakness, dragged the gun down.

"Don't you do it, Champ," he pleaded. "You'll have it on your mind the rest of your life, if you do!"

"Bless you, Happy!" said the wretched man.

"Shut up!" commanded Champ Logan, and poised his foot, as though he were about to kick Tiny Tom in the face. He turned to the boy.

"I wasn't gunna shoot him. Never shot a helpless thing in my life; not even a pig in the fall of the year back on the home ranch, though I jus' nacherally hate pigs. But I wanted to see if he was low enough to beg. Why, after what he's done to us, and tried on us, you wouldn't think that even a snake could look at us without blushin' right through his skin! But there's this poison rat actually beggin' for his life. Look at him now, blubberin'. He ain't a man no more. He's a dang cur, that's what he is!"

"Maybe he is. Leave him be," said the boy, his face twisted with disgust. "I wanta get at the work of fixin' him up."

"Ah, ah, Happy," said the gang leader, "what a lot of good

it would have done me if I'd dropped a couple of those birds myself. What a lot of good it would have done me! They sloped pretty fast, son?"

The boy nodded, but he was already busily at work on big Tom. Champ Logan did nothing except to hold the end of a bandage, now and then, and the boy worked feverishly to get the wound cleaned as well as he could. As for the bandages, he and Champ constantly carried a supply for just such emergencies. Tiny Tom lay with his teeth set. He had manhood enough to endure every twinge of agony as the work went on.

That ended as the day began, and the boy sat down to smoke, while Champ Logan started to make breakfast. He refused, with many oaths when the youngster offered to help him.

"I've gotta learn to handle myself with one arm, now," he said.

"Aw, you'll be all right in a couple or three weeks, Champ."

"The next twenty days is gunna be like twenty centuries, son," said the veteran, "and I expect to cook and eat one meal a day during them twenty days! I'm gunna be alone then, so I might as well start in now!"

"You're gunna be alone?" echoed the boy.

"I'm gunna be alone," insisted Champ.

"Look here, old son," protested the boy, "you don't mean that I'm gunna sashay off and leave you?"

Champ stared at him, either in anger or else simulating that emotion.

"I wanta ask you," said he.

"Ask me what?"

"You didn't want to bump this dog on the head, did you?"

"No. Of course not."

"You ain't changed your mind about him, have you?"

"No. I haven't."

"Well, what're you gunna do? Just walk off and leave him bandaged here, to die before any help could come?"

"You mean that we'll have to stay here with him?" said the boy. He took a long breath and then set his teeth. "We'll stay, then!" said he.

"I'll stay," said the other.

"And me with you, of course."

"Say," roared Champ, "who's the main boss and the old head in this here corporation?"

The boy was silent.

"I am," declared Champ. "Now, you back up and get ready to do what I tell you to do."

"I'm always willing to do that," said Happy Jack stiffly.

"All right, then. Here we are, a couple of wounded men. You climb Rags and ride her down the valley, and break back across the hills. Break back till you find the marshal. Tiny Tom might help us there."

Tom could. With almost trembling eagerness he described and located the marshal's present camp upon a willow creek where he intended to rest for one day.

"What am I to do?" asked the boy. "Even suppose I know where his camp is?"

"Why, what do you suppose? What does your sense tell you? Go for that camp and wave a red rag in the face of the marshal, and lead him out after you, and get him off the red trail that I'm gunna leave behind me, from now on!"

The manner in which this was stated made Happy Jack frown a little. But presently he laid his hand upon the shoulder of his friend.

"I'll do it!" said he. "I'll get him away so hot and fast that he'll forget all about you—and I'll start now!"

He was as good as his word. He swallowed some coffee and toasted venison; in ten minutes he was in the saddle, reaching down to grip Champ's hand.

"You take it easy, Champ," said he. "Don't you ever worry about Kinney. I'll have him off in a minute! He'll never spot your trail, when I get through with him!"

After he had watched the boy out of sight, Champ Logan returned rather gloomily into the mill and sat wearily down without a glance at his companion.

"You know that Kinney has got about twenty of the fastest hosses in the West with him now?" asked Tiny Tom. "If he waves a rag in the marshal's face, ain't he apt to be caught?"

"His luck'll save him," insisted the old man. "And if he stays with me, he's sure to be caught anyway. The best way and the only way is for him to be off and fend for himself. Me—I've turned old, and I'm no good. There's water been in the inside works of this here clock. It's begun to rust, and it don't tell the time."

"Maybe it's gunna stop!" said the other, with irresistible malice.

To this, Champ Logan made no reply. Finally he settled himself in a corner with his back against the wall. His eyes closed and he looked half asleep, but presently a faint whistling began, and went on half audibly, carrying along old tunes.

"Sure—he's pretty old," murmured Tiny Tom to himself.

CHAPTER XXXIX

IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

The Debney Wells *Bugle* was fond of declaring that of all the exploits of Happy Jack Aberdeen, none was really equal to what he did in the camp of Marshal Kinney among the willows. And considering the nature of the peril that he underwent, and the quality of the men who were in that camp, perhaps the *Bugle* was right. But how the boy went about his undertaking makes simple telling.

Before he had been an hour on his way, a thin mist began to steam up from the snow—the sign of an increasing temperature, perhaps—and through this mist, almost indistinguishable because of the lightness in the color of his yellow-gray coat, went a loping lobo wolf, too big, and fat, and strong, and self-confident to hurry very much because a man was near. At the flash of the drawn rifle, to be sure, he began to gallop hard, but the boy reached his heart at the first shot.

It had been an instinctive action. Cow-punchers all hate buffalo wolves because of the destruction that they work among cattle, particularly calves. And, therefore, the rifle had been uncased and the bullet had gone home. But as he sat the saddle and looked down at his prize, the inspiration came to the boy.

Straightway he dismounted, and with cunning knife-work he freed the loose hide from the body and jerked it clear. Then, with the utmost patience, he cleaned that pelt to the white of the hide, and when the fleshing was done—most delicately about the skin of the head—he rolled up the hide and rode on with it.

It was by no means difficult to come close to the camp. He had only to drift down through the willows, after he reached the creek, and when he saw the blink of the campfire through

the mist, which had increased until it was like a thick fog, he made a halt and rested there until the evening came on. Then he tethered his gray mare and went forward on foot to a point at which he could hear the voices in the camp.

Now he donned the wolf skin and went forward on his hands and his knees. The Pawnees were famous in the art of making themselves into wolves; it was an old warrior of that tribe who had instructed the boy in the same art, and he used it now with almost an Indian's cunning and something more, perhaps, than an Indian's boldness.

Cautiously he drifted through the dim mist, which was stained more and more with yellow by the fire, until it began to look like smoke. And, at length, lying prone in the snow with a blanket beneath him, he was within the actual circle of the light. That is to say, he was so near that he could make out the men, and the horses, and the blink of the wet foliage of the willows.

He saw more than enough to fill his eye. There were the men, first of all.

He saw a youngster in greasy leather chaps that glimmered in the firelight. He was frying flapjacks over the fire, squatted on his heels, singing to himself, in spite of the smoke that rolled up into his face.

He saw a broad chunk of a man with a red face, a fleshy forehead, and two pale blond mustaches drooping from his jaw like the tusks of a walrus.

He saw a thin little gray fellow with pathetic eyes fixed upon the frying of the pancakes.

He saw a man who wore a black patch over one eye, the same side of his face horribly contracted by a great scar, so that his mouth was twisted about, and he seemed always smiling. He was tall, rangy; and his way of wearing his guns showed that they were his dear familiars.

They looked not particularly formidable, but the boy knew that these were the chosen spirits. Of the hundreds who had wished to ride with the famous marshal on this trail, he had refused all except the great and proven names of the range, and here they were—four men who might look like four ragged

vagabonds, but the boy could be sure that they were peerless on the trail, senseless to fatigue, deadly with their weapons. So he stared hungrily into their faces, trying to read them, and smiling faintly, cruelly, as he told himself that he would welcome a chance to be cornered by any one of them.

But not by all four!

And where was the marshal himself?

He was at a little distance from the fire, rubbing down a tall, strongly made bay gelding. It might not be another Rags, for speed, but it looked almost up to the mark!

A call came fron the boy at the fire, and the marshal, after giving a few more rubs to the legs of the gelding, came slowly striding in to join the supper circle around the fire.

The change in him shocked even the callous heart of young Aberdeen. He looked a man of fifty, at least. He was very thin, his brows were continually knotted in a frown; and even his massive shoulders seemed a little stooped.

But all his hair was snowy white, and gleamed silvery in the light of the fire. The boy looked, and recognized his own handiwork, and then he could not help but wonder a little!

However, he, or the grinning spirit of mischief within him, had done this thing.

In the meantime, the stage was set for the blow which he wished to strike. The posse sat in a close ring about the little fire, which was thus almost blotted out, and their great shadows loomed against the outer night. Their thoughts were for their food, and not for the wanderer whom they were chasing, while a seeming wolf arose in the snow—almost indistinguishable against it—and slipped stealthily toward the piles of saddles, blankets, packs, and provisions which were heaped near the tethered horses.

Over those horses, as he drew closer, he ran his eye, and he saw that every one had a long reach of neck, stood over a great deal of ground. Each was sleek with good condition. Each was doubtless a proved stayer, or he would not be wearing the saddle of any of these riders. But there was one which stood out beyond the others. That was the long-legged bay.

The boy did not recognize it as having been, in the old

days, in the saddle string of William Kinney. He could not know that the famous marshal had almost mortgaged his very life and exchanged three of his best mounts to get this grand performer; but he knew horseflesh when he saw it. There was nothing pretty about the head or the body of the bay. But he was all points. There was as much bone as you could hold in your hand. And his quarters were enough to pull five tons. With a grin, the boy marked him down.

Then he worked in toward the provision pile and carefully selected—it was easily done by the greasy feel of the canvas covering—a section of a side of bacon. He would actually need that. The grit of coffee was distinguishable through a smaller package, and the wolf made off with his prize.

At the saddle pile, he paused again. But there was no time for such extensive pilfering, and besides, an after-thought drew him back toward the provision heap, while he heard that fellow with the face of a walrus grunting: "Why don't the young un shake off old Logan? He's got clipped wings, travelin' with him!"

"His wings are gunna be clipped to last forever!" said the marshal slowly. The boy listened, and a chill that was not of the snow struck through him.

He found a package wrapped in heavy brown paper and, drawing a soft lead pencil from his pecket, he wrote upon it that phrase which the *Bugle* had made so famous:

DEAR BILL: Thanks a lot. What would I do without you? Yours to the finish,

HAPPY JACK.

He retraced his way then, until he came to the horses, and as he did so, he removed the wolf skin.

However, when he stood up, a black horse reared and snorted and began to plunge violently. He had smelled the scent of the wolf!

"Go over an' stop that fool hoss of yours, Mike," commanded the marshal.

"All right," said the boy, and got up from the fire.

Happy Jack, now standing beside the bay of his choice,

with the body of the animal between him and the fire, pulled the bridle over its head, and slashed the tethering rope.

"Hullo!" called the voice of Mike. "Ain't that somebody over there?"

Happy Jack flashed onto the back of the bay and settled his heels in its flanks.

"Only Jack Aberdeen—so long, boys!" he yelled.

The bay, slipping once as he struggled to get forward in fright and haste, then got his footing and flung forward. A chorus of shouts barked after him, like the yapping of dogs; guns crackled; but when he looked back, he saw that the mist must have covered him thickly, and even the fire was almost indistinguishable.

He drew up the gelding to a walk, so that its noise might not be heard, and turned sharp to the left, circling around the fire.

They would pause to saddle, no doubt. The marshal would have his saddle on an extra horse—

Then, close behind him, a shadow loomed, and broke through the mist, and dashed away, straight ahead, the snow crunching loudly under the foot of the horse. And four other shadows followed.

Jack had slipped to the side and clutched the nostrils of the gelding to keep it from giving a warning whinny. But the five phantoms lurched away into the mist, and the boy trotted the bay back to the fire.

There were still six horses remaining.

He knotted their lead ropes one to the other, so that they could run freely, in a long line. Then a cut with his quirt launched them into the darkness. Away they went with a rush and a roar of hoofs, while he turned back to the provision pile.

There was an extra saddle, of course; this he cinched upon the back of the bay. He now had leisure to take up other things. He selected flour, a little salt, and some jerked venison gladdened his heart. With two horses to carry his loads, he would have plenty of power, and he could travel far. With two such horses as these! So he added some heavy bags of oats, a slicker which he needed badly, his own having been worn to

tatters, and a strong, thick mackintosh, ideal in such weather as that through which he was riding.

After that, he freshened the fire, and propped the brown paper parcel near to its light, and retraced the words he had written, so that they could not fail to be seen. There was so much more meaning to them now!

Then, with a last glance, he made certain that he had forgotten nothing.

Ammunition, to be sure!

He freshened his pouch of bullets, filled his ammunition belt, and then mounted. Out of the distant night, he heard the noise of horses returning to the fire—they had given up their first desperate plunge into the mist!

Without haste, he allowed the bay gelding to walk out into the night.

CHAPTER XL

TOWARD THE BORDER

The marshal and one man went straight ahead on the trail of this insulting outlaw. The other three remained behind to catch up the lost horses, and they never would have overtaken the quarry if it had not been that grossest bad luck blocked the boy in the Benson Pass. He had ventured up the sharp ascent, among all the treacheries of icy rocks and of deep snows, and he had been stopped, when the worst of the work should have been over, by finding the whole pass blocked across by a vast landslide which had choked the gorge with a tumbling of boulders as big as houses. He explored the pile of ruin hopefully, for a long hour, and then he had to admit that he was beaten. He himself could have scaled the height; but the horses could not do it.

And he would not surrender the horses. Rags and the bay were his two prizes of the conflict; the whole world knew about them and how they had been acquired; the whole world knew of his ironical note of thanks to the marshal. The world had laughed, and the boy intended that it should keep on laughing.

So he dared to go straight back down the gorge with both horses, and he came out into the plain beyond with the marshal and the "walrus" both in full sight.

They gave dogged chase; they could not match their horses against his, but they could get fresh horses at almost every halt, and so they gladly forced the fugitive to a hard run across the country.

He was close to the Canadian border now, and he was determined that he would get across. That night a blizzard blew up out of the northeast and screamed down the valleys like a thousand fiends; but he turned straight into its teeth and made a terrible and famous march. He covered more

than twenty miles before dawn; he rested the horses in the little barn of a petty rancher who fed and cherished this celebrated outlaw, and the whole family listened with delight while he sang to his guitar beside their kitchen stove.

But after the horses had been freshened, he started again, north, straight north. Freedom was only a step away when, rounding a corner of a valley, he saw three horsemen coming toward him in the distance, with rifles balanced across their saddle bows.

The face of the boy turned dark with ugly determination. If three lives were all that lay between him and freedom, he could make up his mind at once. He had grasped his own rifle and prepared to go into covert, when he saw more riders still, in the rear. At the same time, the foremost horsemen saw him and came on the dead run.

It was the beginning of a terrible day.

He had to go south down that long valley, with both horses galloping hard. He kept on Rags for the first and hottest hour, and when the mighty mare began to stumble, he changed saddles to the bay, and pressed ahead.

He tried to turn to the west, in the dusk of the day, only to find another array of riders pressing in on him from that direction, and again, groaning with despair, he was then forced south and south!

He was ready for any desperate action now. He could feel even Rags failing beneath him. She was very thin. Her gait had lost its easy spring. And though she had outraced pursuit a dozen times, she could not continue to outlast a fresh hunt each day. Neither could she outpace the telephone and telegraph, which crossed even these frozen mountains with the ease of thought, and caused new enemies to spring up out of the ground.

For a whole week he persevered, while the countryside rang like a bell with the excitement of that great hunt. Seven times, in seven days, did he turn north, and seven times he was checked, and hunted south again.

On the eighth day he did not give up, but once more he rode north, and by the grace of fortune and his own high courage,

he actually broke through the line. He rode the bay gelding over the icy hills, hard as white rock, which lie between the Little Smoky and Oldson Creek. The bay went down in a heap as the descent began.

He got off, changed saddles to Rags, and contemplated ending the life of the gelding then and there. But the poor fellow had served him well, and the heart of the boy softened. He stood for a while trying to come to a decision.

It was the late afternoon of that bleak winter day. His feet were wet and cold; his body was damp and cold, also; he had not stopped shuddering with exhaustion and with the chill during long hours. And yonder, straight down a broad and easy valley, and then across a little stream and an unguarded river, not three miles away, lay liberty, and the end of the long hunt.

He needed merely to put the bay out of his misery and then go on. In ten minutes the long strides of the mare would sweep him over the border!

But the honest eye of the bay gelding held him like the eye of a man. Twice he raised his Colt to fire, and twice his hand fell. Then, with a groan and a curse, panting with anxiety, he bent himself to the work of getting the big fellow up.

He succeeded in that, after wasting precious minutes, and now, with a long glance at those southern summits through which Kinney must be riding now, with his men, the boy started on the way down the slope, keeping the bay to its feet with difficulty, for the gelding walked with buckling knees.

Half a mile down the slope he came to the cottage of a shepherd, and the shepherd was before the house. There he halted, and the man came out and stared at him, a big, rough-coated dog on either side.

"You've got a stable back there," said the boy. "Take this hoss and put him up, blanket him, and throw a good feed of hay into him. If he won't eat that, try him with a hot bran mash, and soak a dram of whisky down his throat, first of all."

The shepherd sneered.

"Who might you be?" he inquired sarcastically. "Boss of the world, or only Jack Aberdeen?"

In spite of his cold, the boy smiled a little.

"I'm Jack Aberdeen," he said quietly.

"You?" said the shepherd, and laughed. "You Jack Aberdeen?"

He stepped closer, still laughing, and peered at the skinny body of the gray mare; and at the blue, pinched face of the boy, and the blue lips, and the cheek bones looking as though they were on the point of pushing through the skin; and the gaunt neck, and the worn, ragged clothes, the long hair, uncombed and unkempt; but, last of all, he stared into the cold, still eye of the boy, and suddenly his laughter stopped and he stepped back a pace.

"Aberdeen!" said he, as though the word were an incantation. "A gray mare and a bay hoss—good gosh!"

Then he broke into violent action: "Look yonder! You only got about three mile or less to go. Ride like thunder. They ain't anybody on the bridge, likely. Ride on, Jack! Here—I'll take the bay. Ride, I tell you! Wait half a second while I fetch you a bottle of whisky and some bacon. And—"

The starved lips of the boy grinned back at the thought of food, but he shook his head. "I've got no time," he said.

"Go on, go on!" cried the shepherd, in a sort of frenzy. "Listen to 'em come! Look at 'em come—"

"It's nobody that wants me," said the boy. "It's only one man."

He said it without boasting; but he was sure that one man would never dare to close on him thus boldly. His rifle balanced on the pommel of the saddle as he turned to face the newcomer, and that face suddenly became familiar, bursting on him through the dimness of the evening. Young Dick Marvel cantered a worn mustang up to him and seized on his hand.

"I've done it, by gravy!" said he. "I've done it! Oh, man, but I've had a far ride. Come on. There's the border at that bridge. Come on with me! Oh, it's the greatest day that I ever hoped to see! Come on, Happy, I'll see you through!"

Happy Jack, looking at that strong, keen, young face, suddenly felt very old. The weight of ancient wisdom and of old

experience seemed to burden his heart, and he smiled at the youngster as though at something in the far distance.

Dick Marvel pressed still closer, as though the misty winter light did not permit him to see clearly. And now he cried out: "But what's happened to you, Happy? You look sick!"

"I'm well enough," said Happy Jack. "You, kid, turn around and go back, will you? Your sister was wrong to send you after me!"

"She didn't send me. But when she seen that I was sure to go, anyway, she sent along a letter to you, Jack. Her picture, or something!"

He gave it, and Happy Jack Aberdeen dropped it into his pocket without a glance at the contents. They did not matter, at that moment. His important task was to see that this romantic and foolish child turned straight back, before he gave to the iron law a chance to accuse him of wrongfully harboring, aiding, assisting, comforting, an outlawed man.

"If luck lets me get across that border, Dick," said Happy Jack, "I'm started on for a new kind of a life, d'you see? I'm going to send back for Kate. I want you there to bring her along. You understand, Dick?"

"I understand," said the boy gravely. "But—I've come a mighty long ways to give you a hand, old-timer."

"You've given me the hand," said the outlaw, "and you've put a pile of heart into me. So long, Dick. Turn back through them hills, and ride hard. It'll do me no good to have the marshal know that you've been up here to help me!"

The boy hesitated, and then sighed.

"What am I to stand here and argue with you, Jack?" said he. "I'll do what you say. Is there any word for Kate?"

"Tell Kate she's gunna be my wife unless Kinney kills me first. Nobody else will ever get up to me. Nobody else would have a chance."

He said this as a matter of course, and wondered why the boy was suddenly gaping at him, as though he had gone mad.

"All right," murmured Dick Marvel. "I'll tell her that."

They shook hands, and Dick sighed: "I sort of thought—"

He paused, unable to finish the sentence, and then turned

away with a hanging head; and young Jack Aberdeen looked after him with a keen understanding. Dick Marvel had been riding those hundreds of miles all in the hope of galloping into the heart of the Aberdeen romance. Now he was ordered home like a child at fault.

But it was better that way, and now, at last, he turned his face toward the long-desired border.

CHAPTER XLI

WHEN GREEK MET GREEK

Rightly enough, Rags trotted down the valley.

She was thin, but she seemed as strongly made as ever, composed of wire and steel springs, and when she saw the gleam of the river, and the white streakings of foam upon its surface, she pricked her ears, as though she understood very well what the passage of that bridge would mean—rest to her, and safety to her rider!

The boy turned and looked behind him, anxiously, but nothing stirred, and no shadowy riders came out from the white, hard hills to his rear. Or, if they did, they were lost in the misty little ravines. And when he came to the head of the bridge, where the ground sloped sharply upward, it seemed to Happy Jack Aberdeen that he never had seen anything as beautiful as the lofty and free spring of the arch from which the bridge was suspended.

Climbing the bridgehead, he checked his mare suddenly, for in a naked thicket of poplars, it seemed to him that he made out the form of a horse lying prostrate upon the ground. He was sure of it, in another moment, and could even see the steam rising from the body into the cold air. Then another form was seen through the poplars; and with one stride the huge form of William Kinney came into the open. His hat was low over his eyes, but they burned through the shadow, and his long white hair made a silver mist about his face.

How had he come there? Aberdeen could understand. Guessing what way the fugitive would try to go, the marshal had outridden the rest of his men, had reached the bridge in time, and had killed his horse in doing so. Yonder the horse lay dead among the poplars!

There was something of even greater importance.

For the hands of the marshal were empty, and the boy understood what this meant. It was to be a fair fight, and no advantage taken!

He was amazed, for this was not the reputation of big William Kinney. He had grown as famous for his ruthlessness as for his success on the man trail; he hunted down men as stalkers hunt down deer, taking them at cruel disadvantage if he could. But now he was altered.

There was all the more meaning in this, because the world would not have asked for details of the battle. If a rifle bullet from yonder thicket of poplars had ended the life of Happy Jack, it would have been accepted by all men simply that Aberdeen had met his master at last, and the fame of the marshal would have been established more enduringly than by brass tablets. But Kinney had apparently grown into a different self on that long trail.

He had sacrificed everything. His glory had been smudged; his money and his lands were gone; the girl he loved was lost to him; and yet when he could have touched a trigger in safety and wiped out the whole long account, he had refused to take his chance.

He preferred to stand man to man, with empty hands, and the boy saw that this giant had grown from a butcher to a knight. Pain had purified him. In the long fire, the baser parts had been burned out of his soul. Something like pity came into the heart of the boy; and then a little chill which he knew was not the chill of the snow, but of fear.

If not his master, at least this man was his equal, and no matter how often he had baffled the giant, and laughed at his bewilderment, the time had come when he could laugh no longer. And suddenly the boy felt his youth, the slightness of his strength compared to this huge form.

His own hands were empty. He had thrust the rifle into its holster on the way to the bridge, and the gun upon which he would have to depend now was hanging beneath the pit of his left arm, in a spring holster. His right hand was in a big mitten, suspended by a string from around his neck. He could snatch that hand out and whip the revolver forth with one

gesture—if only the blood ran freely! In the meantime, he wanted a few seconds in which to work the fingers of the stiff hand, bring the life back into it, give it limber strength such as he would need for a lightning gun-play.

These things he thought out in the first half second; and then the fear left him. He was all iron from head to foot. Pity died in him. He became a machine.

"I don't see a gun on you, kid," said the marshal, "except the rifle, and you wouldn't have time for that. But I guess you got something else?"

"I got a gun, all right," nodded the boy.

The marshal did not draw closer. He stood with his hands upon his hips, his legs spread and braced a little.

"Looks like we've rubbed each other sort of thin," said William Kinney.

"It looks that way," said the boy. And he added, with a sneer: "I can get fat again in a month, though!"

The pale, lean face of Kinney grew dark with anger. He understood that thrust, and now he admitted it.

"Aye," said he, "you can get fat again in a month. You ain't lost your reputation, your money, and Kate Marvel. But there's only one kind of food that'll do me any good!"

The boy nodded. "You mean me, of course."

"I don't want to press you," said the marshal. "But I suppose that you'd have a better chance if you was to get off of the mare and fight it out on foot?"

"Will you give me that chance, too?" said the boy.

"Sure, I'll give you every chance."

"You're feelin' pretty sure of yourself, Bill?" sneered young Aberdeen.

The marshal opened his eyes, as though in surprise.

"Oh, aye," said he. "Fate has give you to me at last, I suppose. You oughta be able to see that?"

"What's Fate got to do with us, Bill?"

"I was a swine," said the marshal, "and Fate sent a thing that burned the swinishness out of me. When Fate had made me into a man, then it gave me my chance to get at close grips with you. And this here chance, it couldn't be throwed away."

"If your hand is faster'n mine, you win," said the boy, "and that's all there is to it. You're talkin' like an old woman!"

"Am I? Well, we'll pretty soon see. There'll be no meanin' to the whole thing unless I beat you now."

"To make up for what you've lost, eh?"

"To make up? I've lost more'n can ever be made up."

"Dang you!" broke out the youngster, in hot bitterness that passed his control. "I was as straight and easy-going a fool as ever lived, until you stepped in with your experimentin'. The money that you stole from me, it's cost the life of Charlie Lake, it's burned your ranch, killed your cows and hosses, and wrecked you. It's turned you out of your fine big name; it's made you a joke; they laugh at Bill Kinney all over the country."

"All that you say is pretty true," said the marshal with a wonderful quiet. "But the fact is, son, that I don't think they'll laugh much longer. But if they do, it don't matter much to me. It ain't the cheerin' and the yellin' of the rest of the world that I care about."

"What is it that you care about, Bill?"

"My own judgment on myself," said the marshal. "What's the word of the governor to me? As for you, I've done you harm, and a big harm. You was a straight kid, and a simple kid. I cornered you. The professor was right. You turned bad. Well, the most of your badness has been poured out on me. My money, my land, my cows, and my hosses are done for; Kate is gone, and she'll never come back to me now. You've had an evil spirit raised in you, and that evil spirit has sunk its teeth in my throat. I've been through fire. Now I've come to the end of it, and the end of you. I've made you bad. Here's where I send you down to where you belong. Kid, are you ready?"

"Ready, Bill!"

"If you go, is there one last thing that I can do for you?"

"There's a letter in my pocket from Kate. Burn that letter without lettin' the world see it."

"On my word of honor, I'll do you right, Jack."

"What could I do for you, Bill?"

"If I die, drag me to the bridge and throw me into the water. You'll have enough of my trappin's to prove that you beat me. That'll be fame for you! But throw the remains of me into the river, and let it be chawed small among the rocks."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"I'll do what you want, Bill!"

"Then—are you set?"

"I'm set."

"Heaven have mercy on us both," said Marshal Kinney.

And he reached from his hip for his right-hand Colt.

He had an easier line and a shorter one to get to the gun and to get the gun out of the leather, but, after drawing, the muzzle was tipped down unless an expert could spin it into position very quickly. An expert was the marshal.

He actually put in the first shot, but his speed made him a trifle wild. His bullet tore away the left side of the hat brim of Happy Jack. And Jack, as he stood at the head of the gray mare, fired without doubt, without fear of a miss. It seemed to him that the surety of a divinity was poured into him. He could not miss!

The marshal dropped both guns, staggered, threw his hands to his face, and fell back into the snow.

The boy followed him.

The whole face of the marshal was crimson; his eyes could not be seen, and there seemed to be a huge gash across his forehead. Happy Jack shuddered. But he kneeled beside the fallen body to look at the wound more closely and make sure that it had really been fatal.

He kneeled, and in that moment two great arms gathered around him and he was crushed to the breast of William Kinney!

He fought with all his might, but his might was of no use. As a great snake coils about a victim and paralyzes it with its first grasp, so the grasp of the marshal's big arm paralyzed the boy. He had less power than a child against that incredible might. There was nothing but a hideous numbness that pervaded all his body. Something snapped and he was sure that

it was the small of his backbone. Blackness rushed in a wave across his eyes. He knew that he had a revolver in his right hand, and that that hand was against the breast of the marshal. If he could so much as pull the trigger, perhaps that shot would liberate him.

But he could do nothing; his eyes seemed bursting from his head. Then, mercifully, he fainted.

CHAPTER XLII

AT THE END OF THE RUN

When consciousness came back to the boy, the grip which was upon him no longer was so crushing and strangling, so beyond the power of humanity to inflict or to endure. Instead, he was being carried almost gently along in the arms of the giant.

But there was something wavering, vacillating, heavily stumbling in the gait of the marshal, and he looked up into the face of the man, and saw that there was no light in the eyes. They were fixed straight ahead, but they saw nothing except some picture of horror which had formed in the mind of William Kinney.

And then the boy understood. The raw gash of the bullet across the forehead of the marshal had blinded him, and that was why he went forward now with this fumbling step.

To what was he progressing? He understood that, also, in the next moment, for the roaring of the little creek was growing louder and louder, and presently, the giant paused on the very verge of it.

That was to be the end, then, for him? To be flung from the height and flung to death in the waters of the stream?

He turned his head and looked below, and the white leaping of the stream gave him a frenzied power. He strained and twisted furiously. He managed to get a hand free and beat it against the face of the marshal; but Kinney laughed at the blows.

"Be still, Jack," said he. "Heaven is gunna take the two of us, now that we've come to the end of this here trail. It's gunna take hold of us two, and look through us, if I can find the way to die."

He stepped forward. A cry of horror rose to the lips of the boy, and the marshal said with a sort of savage joy:

"Do I hear ye singin', Jack? It ain't the song that made the whole crowd laugh so hard with you, though. Sounds like a different song to me."

He staggered on a brink. And the boy saw that they were above a ragged growth of brush and young saplings which lay between them and the water. The big man dipped a foot over the verge, to make sure that he had come to the edge of the cliff. Then, throwing back his head as though he were sending upward some last message to Heaven, he sprang forward from the verge of the height.

Twenty feet they dropped down into the arms of the brush. The strong grip of the giant was torn away, and the boy, spinning catlike, clutched at the side of a sapling. It bent like a bow under the impact, but in another instant he was standing safely at its base.

His ribs were half broken. The greatness of the strain on body and on nerve caused the blood to hammer heavily in the base of his brain. He was dizzy, and the creek seemed a flood that was raging furiously in a circle about him.

Then that mist cleared, and he was able to see where the marshal lay, half in the water and half out, his head submerged.

He ran stumbling through the brush, fell loosely to his knee as he tripped over a rock, and so came to the big man.

He was so weak that when he laid his hand upon the shoulder of William Kinney, he could not budge him. He dropped that hand for an instant on the back of the man and felt the faint pulsation of the heart.

He lay there, stunned, drowning, and the boy was helpless to save him, as it seemed.

At this, an overmastering horror rushed upon the brain of the boy. He stepped into the stream, and the icy pouring of the water about him restored him a little. He was able to take the other by the shoulders and lift him, then roll him onto the bank of the stream.

The water had washed the bloodstains from the face of the marshal. But the deep furrow of the bullet wound still re-

mained, and the half-opened eyes saw nothing. More crimson issued from his thigh. The boy cut away the clothes and exposed the horribly fractured and twisted leg. It made him groan to see the thing.

He clambered to the top of the bank. He had saved the man from actual death by drowning. There was no need for him to risk his own safety by remaining longer. If the men who rode behind the marshal were worth their salt, they surely would be able to find him, and they would save him, then!

He mounted Rags, and he had come to the edge of the bridge, when suddenly she halted. He touched her with a spur, but before she stepped forward again, he heard a deep groan rising above the sound of the water.

It mastered the spirit of the boy at once.

He dismounted, and running back to the dead horse of the marshal, which lay among the poplars beside the bridge, he was able to make out where the marshal had rolled the big animal from the spot where it had dropped down to this one more sheltered from the eye of the observer. He unsaddled the horse, and then he took the saddle blanket, and the slicker and the coat which were lashed behind the saddle.

With these he hurried down to the river's side, and as he climbed, he felt the sting of driving snow. It was coming in thick flurries, whipped by a rising wind. He hesitated once more. He could ride back to the house of the shepherd—

But then the thought of what even an hour's exposure might do to the marshal sent him forward again, groaning. Yonder across this narrow water was his freedom, but he could not leave the body of his enemy! His duty held him there with a frightful grip.

Before he dared to attempt to move the unconscious man, he arranged a simple splint for the broken bone. It was made of the straight shoots of wood which he could cut near at hand, and these he bound strongly in place with a bandage. Another bandage he drew around the gashed forehead of Kinney, after he had dressed it.

Swiftly he worked, regardless of the groans which came heavily from the lips of the marshal from time to time. And

he cursed the necessity which kept him here, and a thousand times glanced nervously from one side or the other into the gathering darkness.

Taking the body beneath the arms, he was able to drag that great, loose bulk only with the greatest difficulty, but by degrees he got it into the poplar copse. The dust was gathering, and he worked in a frenzy. The ax which he always carried with his saddle now came into quick service. He slashed down the tender saplings until he had enough of them to make a shallow lean-to against the bank, and this was the first shelter for the wounded man. Then he ripped up the brush, beat the water out of it, spread a slicker over this, and a blanket over the slicker, and thus was able to prepare a fairly comfortable bed. Onto this, he worked the body of the big man by degrees. The wind was shrieking now, and driving the snow in quantities against the lean-to, but the first downfall simply served to thatch the interstices between the saplings, and to make the shelter snug.

All this had been accomplished, and he was about to leave the man, and make a swift excursion back to the shepherd, to warn him of the marshal's plight, when the wounded man roused himself, and heaved himself up on his elbows.

"Who's there?" called the marshal.

And his eyes flamed through the dusk. The blindness which had possessed him had been the effect, it seemed, more of shock than of the actual severing of the optic nerve.

"Who's there, in Heaven's name?" repeated the marshal.

"I'm here, Kinney," said the boy.

"You—you!" said Kinney. "It ain't possible! I—I had you safe—I jumped into—"

"You jumped into a nest of poplars, Kinney. They brushed me out of your grip. That's why I'm alive, and that's why you ain't dead, too. I found you with your head in the creek."

Kinney lay back again with a long breath.

"You should've let me lay," said he. "I've cracked my leg?"

"It's busted in the thigh—a bad break for you, Kinney, I'm afraid. Lie still. I'll go fetch you better help than I am. I can't stay, Kinney!"

"So long," said the marshal. His voice choked: "By Heaven, Jack, have you stayed here to take care of me instead of brainin' me and goin' on?"

"So long," said the boy. "Lie still. They'll fetch you to a better place than this, I reckon! Bill—"

He paused. Then he leaned into the little shelter and found the great hand of the marshal.

"Bill, it was a long run, and a hard run. I wanta say, here at the end of it, that I got no malice agin' you."

Bill Kinney grasped the proffered hand.

"There's a lot of things," said he, "that lies outside of talk, kid. So long. Take care of yourself!"

That was the strange manner of their parting, or what they intended for a parting.

But as the boy straightened and turned away, a double-barreled shotgun was thrust against his breast and he was commanded to hoist his hands.

Shotguns are not to be argued with. He obeyed.

CHAPTER XLIII

FOREVER AFTER

They kept the hands of Happy Jack in irons behind the small of his back. They fastened his feet together with another chain that passed under the belly of his horse. But they permitted him to ride the tall gray mare, Rags.

The marshal, borne on a litter as far as the first village, stopped there and went to bed to wait for the long and painful business of curing his leg. But Happy Jack Aberdeen was carried back down the range in a long, slow march, to the town of Debney Wells.

And, everywhere, he was received like a conquering hero, rather than as an outlawed man, wanted for his crimes. Debney Wells itself, lining the street down which he passed cheered him to the echo, and promised him with one voice to pluck him out of the jail again, if he were lodged in the solitary cell.

The sense of the sheriff was too good to admit of that. He lodged the boy as comfortably as his jail permitted him to be lodged, and let a constant stream of visitors flow through to see the boy. Only, at the end of the first day, he leaned against the bars and inquired how many saws and chisels and other devices for cutting steel had been given to him during the course of the day. And Jack Aberdeen willingly turned back the blanket of his bed and showed a glittering collection. He passed them out through the bars.

"I understand you, Jack," said the sheriff. "You ain't going to make any fool breaks."

"None," said Jack Aberdeen. "You can write it down and believe it. They couldn't pry me loose from this jail, till I've been tried and had my sentence."

"Maybe they won't be no sentence," said the sheriff. "I

hear that the marshal has wrote a long letter to the governor. I understand that that letter ain't wrote by no enemy."

"Enemy?" said Jack. "Of course, we're not enemies!"

"Likely," said the sheriff, "that you was just playin' tag with each other around through these here mountains!"

"Well," said the boy, "I used to be what they call a desperate character, but the marshal sure did squeeze all of the desperation out of me, sheriff. If a lamb was to shake its head at me, I'd turn around and run."

"There's a lamb waiting to see you now, yonder in the office. I reckon that I could take the irons off of you, son?"

"These here irons," declared Jack Aberdeen, "mean a lot more to me than jewels. They show me that I'm safe."

"Well," said the sheriff, "the fact is that you might need your hands, in yonder."

He led Aberdeen, freed from manacles, down the aisle between the cells, and opening wide the door of the office, he fairly thrust him in, and slammed the door heavily behind him. Even so, he had one glimpse of beautiful Kate Marvel springing up from her chair, and of her smile as she saw the prisoner.

The sheriff strolled to the door of the jail and grinned to himself as he rolled a cigarette.

"Hey, boss," said a passing cowpuncher, "How's Happy?"

"Happy seems to be standin' it," said the sheriff. "He don't want to be bothered by none of your rough parties, though."

"I reckon he's tired."

"He's gunna take a long vacation," said the sheriff.

"But not in jail," said the puncher.

"Why for not?"

"Because folks ain't gunna stand for it."

"Ain't they?"

"Hey, boss, wasn't he caught because he was takin' care of the marshal?"

"The law's a dang funny thing," said the sheriff, "and it sure hates to let go its hold!"

The law proved that, too, most violently, a few weeks later, when the trial of the boy took place in Debney Wells. The

courtroom was packed with an admiring crowd every day. The jury itself was filled with infinite prejudice in favor of the prisoner. But, when the judge delivered his final instructions, there was nothing for the jury to do but to declare Jack Aberdeen guilty. They brought in their verdict with regret. The foreman made a long speech excusing himself and his compeers and declaring that the hardest thing they ever did was to convict Jack Aberdeen. And they recommended mercy.

"Sheriff," said the judge, at this point, "can you keep that crowd from lynching me, if I give a sentence on Aberdeen?"

"Sure," said the sheriff. "But I can't swear that I'll be able to hang onto him."

The judge rose and made a very short speech. Duty controlled him. The least that he could give was a five-year sentence. And, after all, Jack Aberdeen deserved that much punishment.

The crowd disagreed. It rose with a roar and poured forward, until some excited shouting at the door of the courtroom made it halt and turn.

Sam Phelps, turning with the others, abandoned his note-taking and snatched up his camera with a gasp, for yonder in the doorway stood the mighty form of Marshal William Kinney, braced on two heavy crutches. He came forward to the desk of the judge, and balancing himself on his leg and one crutch, he handed up a long, legal-looking paper.

The judge read it with attention.

"Sheriff," said he with a smile, "you won't need to guard this prisoner any longer. The governor has decided otherwise. This is his free pardon. Marshal Kinney, you never did a better job than this for the entire community!"

Sam Phelps, at this announcement, shouted with excitement. He waited for no more, but was seen to rush from the courtroom, and run down the street with his coat tails flying, taking shorthand notes as he ran, now and again pausing, in order to jot down a particularly brilliant idea.

But the heart of Sam was sad, because he realized that the episode which had made him and his newspaper famous throughout the West was now finished. However, he would never die in a poorhouse!

Young Jack Aberdeen had found Kate Marvel in the crowd. The moment he joined her, the thumping on his back ceased, and the wild shouting, and the cheering and congratulating. They let him alone, as though they realized that she had a superior right to the hero.

So the young couple escaped.

They got to the Marvel house, and there Dick Marvel was waiting, and old Joe Marvel, with a pale but cheerful face.

"But where's the marshal?" asked Jack Aberdeen. "Would it cut him too deep to be here?"

They sent out to search for William Kinney, but he was not to be found. Already he was far away on the out trail.

He sat sidewise in a small buckboard drawn by a pair of little short-stepping mustangs. The long white hair blew over his shoulders like a mist, his iron face was set straight before him, and so the buckboard climbed the range, and the night came up from the face of the earth, and the marshal drove on, insensible even to the torment of his leg, and crossed the summit, and dipped down into a new country beyond.

Champ Logan was a visitor who came often to the home of Jack Aberdeen and his young wife.

The old man had not mended his ways, but from time to time he slipped in out of the night and rested, gathered his nerves for another whirl in the world of crime, and then launched forth again like an old hawk, a little ragged in feather, but still fierce and strong upon the wing!

And Happy Jack himself?

He came into a strange way of living. For he was himself made marshal in place of famous Bill Kinney. However, he had the easiest of lives, for criminals did not find pleasure in tempting the pursuit of this celebrated traveler and his great gray mare.

He and Kate Marvel settled to the most quiet sort of an existence on a little farm near the town. They never were rich, except in happiness, but that they had in the greatest excess; and there was never a shadow across their lives except once, years afterward, when at the christening of one of their chil-

dren, a big man with a face of iron and snowy-white hair appeared for a moment in the church, looked carefully at them both, and disappeared before the ceremony was ended.

They never saw Marshall William Kinney again. Some said that he had gone off to make a new life in South Africa, or Australia. But he was never really out of the life of the Aberdeens, and when Kate saw a peculiar expression of thought and of pain on the face of her husband, she knew well enough that he was thinking of the vanished man.